Unscarred

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Unscarred

by BlueMaple

Summary

Will wakes post the Season 2 finale, back in the motel room on the morning of his shooting of Garrett Jacob Hobbs. He is not pleased to see Hannibal Lecter on his doorstep, but for once, he realizes... It's his turn to set events into motion and see what happens.

THIS WORK HAS NOT BEEN ABANDONED. IT'S SUFFERING FROM THE LONG TERM EFFECTS OF COVID MALAISE, BUT WILL RETURN. I PROMISE!

Notes

I hold no rights to the characters in this fic, or to the bits of quoted dialogue and the ongoing context that anyone familiar with Thomas Harris' books and Bryan Fuller's TV series will recognize on sight. Nor do I own a time turner or a key to an AU which would permit me to re-arrange Hannibal and Will's lives past the point where the canon plot-lines completely and irrevocably broke my heart. So... This is going to have to do. :)

Chapter 1

Duluth, Minnesota

Someone is rapping their knuckles gently on the side of Will Graham's head, patiently and rhythmically, and after the week he's had - the months, years, *eternity* he's had - he is seriously tempted to tell them to just go get a goddamned bone saw and open the door themselves already.

Instead, he opens his eyes. The hospital room is pitch dark, the curtains drawn, and while the knocking persists, the soft, querying beeping is silenced. For a moment, he wonders if he is dead: flat-lined, the machines put out of his misery for once and all… Upon deliberation, it actually seems a possibility. His eviscerated gut doesn't hurt, anyway, and that's enough to qualify his current circumstances as heaven right there.

His head hurts, though, and he is flushed and unbearably warm and dry-mouthed, and his eyes feel as if they're pressing out from behind themselves. He's also quite disgustingly sweaty. *Hell's ante-room it is, then,* he thinks, and tosses the blanket back groggily, and swats at his head. The knocking continues. After more deliberation, he concludes that perhaps, it is not his head at all, but the door. He staggers up, wiping sweat out of his eyes, and turns the lamp on.

It takes a full minute for Will Graham to process - physically, anyway - what he is seeing, and when he lifts his shirt, what he is not. His bare, flat stomach is smooth and unscarred, and…

He grabs for the paper on the nightstand, fumbling, automatically palming a few pills from the open bottle beside it and swallowing dry. The date is unmistakable. He lowers the paper and turns in a small circle in helpless confusion, the caked, half-dissolved aspirin chalky in his mouth. Checks the date again. It has not changed.

The patient knocking is still persisting. Will sets the paper down, and the task of figuring out the implications aside for later, and makes his way over to the door of the cheap, drive-by motel room.

As it turns out, it is the psychiatrist knocking, not the patient. Will stares the vision before him: a deer caught in the calm, gently inquiring, merlot headlights - or more aptly, and as memory serves all too well, as a series of dark haired, light-eyed girls caught and impaled on the particular deer's antlers.

He doesn't need empathy to figure this situation out, he thinks. It's not an hallucination. Sadly… Not an hallucination.

The devil, and time itself, it seems, have somehow come round to roost.

“Good morning, Will,” the deer’s deep, pleasant voice greets him. Will just continues to stare, hand still on the doorknob, at the tall, elegant figure in grey slacks, open-throated white dress shirt, and the blazer the colour of dried, old blood clots. “May I come in?’

Will’s eyes dart around, looking everywhere but at Hannibal Lecter’s eerily beautiful, austere and elegant face. His lips curl slightly in on themselves, in self protection.

“Where’s Crawford,” he says. It is low, suspicious. Inflamed, if, at this stage, quietly so. His t-shirt and boxers cling to him, wetly as the bloody past.

“Deposed in court,” Lecter says. *Lecter,* not Hannibal. Hannibal, such as he was, is dead: dead in his own kitchen, slain in the moment that he ground his linoleum knife in Will’s now untouched gut. Buried light years away, beyond the realms and reaches of all purported and disproven friendship. “The adventure will be yours and mine today.” His lips turn up, just a little, tight as a delicately white, bared throat. Will can say nothing: eyes darting and darting as he processes, or tries to. Lecter’s own thin, fine lips do not curve down; that would, of course, be rude, but they definitely straighten. Precisely.

“May I come in?’ Lecter says again, with definite undertones of ‘I am fully aware of how early it is, so I shall overlook it this time, but you had best be careful now because I’m picturing you naked, and your bilious spleen and liver are looking quite enticing.’

Will stands aside, or rather, steps back, eyeing the thermal bag in Lecter’s hand as he does so. The room beyond is dark again. Shadows moving, back turned, he attempts to collect himself. The heated flush is not disappearing. He reaches for his jeans as the other man enters, closing the screen behind him.

“I’m very careful about what I put into my body,” the cannibal behind him says. “Which means I end up preparing most of my meals myself.”

Way to lay it out on the table, Will thinks as he turns back. *Was he always this unsubtle,* and the question is answered when he somehow finds himself seated at the table by the motel window, watching Hannibal Lecter laying out Cassie Boyle’s carefully seasoned and exquisitely prepared lungs in a bed of delicately scrambled egg-in-cream, garden-fresh tomatoes and home-grown herbs.

“You’re very kind,” he says politely. His gut may be unscarred, but his memory is not, and till he figures out what the hell is going on, mannerly prudence (never mind sour, ironic self-amusement) is yet the order of the day. “It looks very… “ He pauses a beat. “Fresh.”

“I insist on it.” Lecter pries lids off briskly. The smells are absolutely dizzying.

“Did you make the sausage yourself?’ Will inquires, without picking up his fork.

“As a matter of fact, I did. Please.” He gestures with his own fork. “Though if you plan to request the recipe, I must regretfully refuse you.”

“Everyone’s entitled to their secrets.”

“Now, now. Watch your language before the psychiatrist, please, Mr. Graham.”

Will doesn’t laugh. He says nothing, just reaches for the coffee. Hannibal - no, *Lecter* - pushes the tiny portable sugar bowl over encouragingly. Will doesn’t even look at it, noting how the man takes his own coffee, black and unsweetened. He sips the coffee straight, deliberately. He has standards for those things that enter his body too, these days. Especially when it comes to linoleum knives, and anything white and powdered-down from the particular medical source.

“First cup of the day straight up,” Han - *Lecter* - says. “I’ll remember.”

“All the cups of the day straight up,” Will corrects. “And please don’t think I don’t appreciate it, never mind my morning manners, but for future reference… I’m a vegetarian.”

That earns him an outright slow blink.

“Are you,” Lecter says. “Well. That will serve as a challenge the next time we repeat this experience."

“I still eat fish. If it’s any consolation. I have a river back my house in Virginia, and it’s my hobby. Fishing, that is. Have you ever fished, Dr. Lecter?’

“Now and again,” Dr. Lecter says. “Occupational hazard of psychiatry.”

“Mm.” Will closes the plastic lid on Cassie Boyle’s neo-tupperware coffin firmly. “Again, I truly appreciate your thoughtfulness, and the effort. We can stop on the way at a drive-through, and I’ll pick up an egg and cheese McMuffin or something.”

The pained look on Hannibal Lecter’s face actually makes him laugh out loud.

“Just so you know, I’m fully aware that Jack’s going to want us to continue our therapeutic relationship after this is all over. He’s not exactly subtle, and as this is his opening foray into getting me back into the field full time, that’s going to require a clean report.”

“Is that a problem?” Lecter inquires, forking up a bite of sausage. “You were quite adamantly against the idea of psychoanalysis the last time we talked. I believe your phrasing was ‘You wouldn’t like me psychoanalyzed'.”

“Something else to remember,” Will says coolly. “We’re not friends, Dr. Lecter. If I wanted to be your friend, I would be telling Jack to find me another therapist. As it is… I just don’t find you that interesting.”

“You will,” Lecter says confidently. Smugly. “I take it you are not the sort of vegetarian who eats around the meat?"

“I am not. And I can smell animal stock at a thousand yards, so there’s no getting around it there, either."

“You have an acute sense of smell,” Lecter observes. “Something we have in common. I once diagnosed a professor of mine with stomach cancer from scent alone, before he was ever aware.”

“You don’t say. Here’s another one for you, then. What’s wrong with me?"

“I beg your pardon?"

“I’ve gone in for a particular series of medical tests recently. There was a definitive diagnosis. Still relatively early stages, so they booked me a date instead of admitting immediately, and this is my gap week. I’ll be taking some time off after this is all over again to get treated. What am I being treated for, Doctor?’

Lecter puts his utensils down and rises, coming around the table. Will turns slightly so that as the other man stands behind him, he is not quite at his back. A large, warm hand descends lightly on his shoulder, and the sleek, elegant head tilts. The merlot eyes close and the nostrils flare.

“Encephalitis,” he says. “Quite distinctive, really. Not terribly advanced yet, as you say, but definitely entrenched.”

“Well done,” Will congratulates him, and lets his eyes drift to the window as the murderer returns to his seat. *That should buy me a few weeks, anyway. He’s not going to off me for being rude while I’m unhealthy, and in the meantime… I can figure out what the hell is going on here.*

“Tell me, Will,” Hannibal is saying. “Of what you garnered from the crime scene yesterday.”

“It’s not the same guy.”

“No? Well, the devil *is* in the details. Tell me, what did he do - or didn’t do, this time - that’s led you to the conclusion?"

“Whoever this guy - this copycat - is, the crudity and banality of his methods were very, very deliberate. The scene was presented as an exercise in demonstrative contrast, meant to clarify the specifics of the interpreted clues left by the Shrike’s kills as a photo-negative. That lends itself to one of two probabilities: He’s either invested in the Shrike - they’re associates or partners - and is trying to throw me off, or they have something else in common that he feels creates a bond between them. If that’s the case, he considers all of this a sign, and with this murder… He’s making the blatantly obvious point because he’s now considering a return himself. A return, not a debut, and that would mean he’s already on the FBI wanted roster, and they’ve very familiar with him. So he’s taunting them with it. More for his own entertainment than anything else; he probably doesn’t expect much from them at this point, if anything, but he’s bored and restless to the point of climbing the walls, and he sees this case as a forum to display his opening sally before he makes his next move. To set the scene, so to speak, and warm up the spotlight before his open return.”

“Interesting. Go on.”

“It’s an exercise in anti-aestheticism,” Will says again. “Crude, vulgar, disdainful… A tap on the cheek, or rather a flicked finger that says, to those who would reduce the Shrike’s efforts, both ‘don’t be so ignorant’ and ‘show respect. He’s honouring his victims, after all, and deserves recognition for his efforts, not disdain'.” He drains his cup. “He’s not a copycat. He’s an apologist, for the Shrike’s style. A psychopath and a sadist, but this wasn’t personal. It wasn't even interesting. There’s no investment there, and he’ll never kill like this again. As such, he’s going to be near impossible to catch… But that doesn’t mean he’s not going to allow us to see his face. He’s laid himself bare, out in the open field for all to see.”

“Mm?” the psychiatrist says encouragingly. Will cocks his head, headache slightly dulled now by the aspirin.

“He’s been quiet for going on two years,” he says. “But he’s starting to feel inspired again. Waking up from his nap. This - Cassie Boyle’s murder - is meant as a phone call left on the machine. Translates as: “Mm, smell that? I’ve caught the scent again from the backyard one over, so.. Heads up, or rather off. Meat’s back on the menu, kiddies, and fire up your grills, because Daddy’s planning on making a stop at the butcher’s on the way home from work and it’s going to be a right and proper party.” He sips. “All else aside... I’m the fine china pulled out for special occasions, right? Who deserves the fine china, or would appreciate it, more than the Chesapeake Ripper?"

Will Graham hasn’t often in the past had opportunity to see Hannibal Lecter’s mouth drop open in shock. He doesn’t see it now, but that lidded look of appreciation, admiration, and intrigue is achingly familiar, and pisses him off more than anything ever has in his life.

Sweet nothings in his ear aside… Sweet ears forced down his throat, never mind everything else definitely *not* aside…That linoleum knife to the gut had *hurt.*

“Have you shared this theory with Jack Crawford yet?” Lecter asks.

“No,” Will says. “I have not.”

“Why not?’

“Because he *is* obsessed with the Ripper case, and as the Shrike’s worked so very, very hard to honour these girls in all ways - and left the nice apology too - he deserves our full attention till the situation is resolved. He might not be thinking that, but the Ripper would. He’s left his message, and now… He’s just going to sit back and wait to see what happens next.” He pours himself more coffee. “The machine that got the message… It’s not a message to Jack anyway. It’s a message to me. He finds me interesting, like I said, and is testing me, given my established position on the spectrum and my proven anti-social inclinations, on just how much of my public persona is really me, and how much is just the neo-human suit.”

“He is psychoanalyzing you,” Lecter observes. “Oh dear. Off on the wrong foot already."

“Mm. It’s not really as much psychoanalyzing as it is initiating a dialogue. He wants - or is wondering - if he’s found someone who could be a friend. An associate. And he’s extended

the invitation for an interview, to see what happens."

He is pushing it, he knows. Pushing it hard, to the definite borders of suicide, never mind the suicidally rude. Lecter just scrapes up the last of his scramble and begins to tidy neatly.

"What do you think he would do if he reached the particular conclusions?" he inquires.

"It's not his really his conclusion to reach, is it?" Will says. "The doctrine of good and evil is extremely subjective on the certain level, Dr. Lecter. As subjective as the definitions of good and evil themselves. To the psychopathic mind, morality is a construct rather than an absolute. Evil equates with destructive. Storms are destructive, therefore if evil it were an absolute again, storms must be evil. It sounds absurd, doesn't it? It is absurd, so to the psychopathic mind again, the concept of evil must be absurd. There's a step missing in there, though."

"Tell me."

"Intent," Will says. 'It's the intent to commit the destructive act that may be defined, ultimately, as evil. However inclined I may or may not be to accept his invitation… It's my choice."

He doesn't actually see Lecter's eyes roll heavenwards at that, because they don't, but then again, with his empathic gift, he doesn't have to. He sits back instead, mirroring Lecter's body language quite intentionally, as both a sop to the man's pride and as a good little empath would. "We all die. Everyone dies. It's the great leveler. Brings us all to the same place. Even if you're a psychopath that doesn't believe in the afterlife, or who just disdains God, you can still respect the human desire for something more. Something greater than yourself, and want to be a part of it. And as in that aesthete of a psychopath's mind- the mind where the aesthetic abides, where the love of art and literature and beauty is the pinnacle of human achievement, he grants his victims their final prayer, their deepest human desire, and cannibalizes them, making them literally a part of that something greater. Himself. His kills are gruesome, brutal in their beauty, as life is both brutal and beautiful… But they're a gift too. And again, he is the benefactor. I imagine he rather enjoys that position, on all levels. His intent is not to destroy. It's to raise up. Therefore in his eye… There is no intention to commit evil on his part, and he is not damned. He is intending only good, after all. He has no need to hide from God, because he is not ashamed of what he does."

"This is how the Ripper sees the Shrike? As a fellow benefactor?'

Will pretends to deliberate that.

"No. An acolyte, rather. An instinctive one, not a deliberate one. Like a naturally gifted but untrained artist. Because again.. It's the deliberate self-knowledge and exercising of intent that makes a true master. And the Shrike is too focused. Too limited. Somewhere in there, in his mind, he has singular motive. Singular motive limits you. It's what's crippling Jack, again, in his search for the Ripper. He insists that somewhere in there, the man has motive. He doesn't. He's just a broad-spectrum aesthete, and he's curious, and intellectual, and wants to see where human nature leads itself when he knocks a pebble this way or that." He stands up again as Lecter packs the last of his things away, and pushes his chair in. "This pebble has

gotten the message from his machine. He's off to finish the business at hand before returning the call. The Ripper is a gentleman. He understands and appreciates that one must complete a painting before proceeding to the next, or the paints get mixed on the brush, and the lines will blur. He'll wait for me, and I'm sure, once I'm admitted for treatment, he'll understand especially well. Might even appreciate it. A clear, uninfected mind on my part might not be as easy to manipulate or play with, but it's a lot more of a challenge in the end."

"Indeed," Lecter returns, as Will collects his clothes. Will can tell that he's not remotely suspicious yet, simply intrigued, but then again, the man does have that rather massive ego as a handicap.

They pack up and make their way to the car. Will does, in fact, insist at stopping at McDonald's, though he forgoes the egg and cheese McMuffin for the fruit and yogurt parfait and a bottle of orange juice. Generic orange juice, not the Tropicana. Just because he can.

Several hours later, Lecter's box of dropped papers and his retreat back inside the trailer to make the call to Garrett Jacob Hobbs diverted, the Minnesota Shrike is in police custody, both kneecaps shot out exactingly through the opened kitchen window. Hobbs is taken in, and Abigail and her mother are retained for questioning as the contents of their freezers are confiscated for analysis.

"Good job, Will," Jack says grimly, appeared on the scene at last. "You'll be in for a commendation for this one."

"My pleasure." Will tucks his gun away tidily. "See that the girl gets a good psychiatrist. A woman would likely be better, under the circumstances."

"What circumstances are those?"

"She was his golden ticket," he says. "And an only child. Total Daddy's girl if I've ever seen one. I'm sure they spent a lot of time together, and if you check out the house, there are a lot of hunting trophies. What's a man to do, when he doesn't have a son to take hunting with him?"

Jack's eyes close slightly.

"Goddammit," he said. "You think?" Behind him, Han - *Lecter* - looks amused.

"You don't?" Will returns. "The guy respects women. He loves them. He's a fan of ending things mercifully, and studies prove that animals that feel threatened taste bad. He'd want them calm, maybe even feeling safe and protected, and what better way to do that than to lull them into a false sense of security? I don't think she wanted to help him, but really, after the point… She must have realized that it was them or her. Give her a mother figure who'll make her accountable." He eyes Lecter, opening his mouth, undoubtedly, to recommend Bedelia Du Maurier. "Or a sister figure, to guilt it out of her. Alana Bloom'd be perfect, if she's aware of what she's looking for."

Jack nods choppily.

“We’ll call you tomorrow for the post-mortem analysis,” he says.

“Ah. That won’t work for me, I’m afraid. I’ll be making the arrangements to book myself into the hospital."

“What?" He blinks.

“I have early-onset encephalitis,” Will explains. “Well, early-to-moderate onset. Gotta go ice my brain, otherwise I’ll be dealing with seizures, hallucinations, dementia, you name it. Those don’t go well with… Anything, really.”

“Oh my God, Will!” Jack looks genuinely appalled. “I had no… Why didn’t you tell me?"

“I just did. Do me a favour, Jack?"

“What?”

“Make yourself a doctor’s appointment. One for Bella too. It’s not that I’m worried… But I wasn’t expecting it, just thought I had a sinus infection or something, and my neurologist says that I’m probably the luckiest bastard on the planet. Usually, they don’t catch these things till things are a lot worse, and you can’t always knock the kneecaps out without further harm, you know?”

He makes his way back to the car. Lecter walks beside him solicitously.

“That was kind of you,” he observes.

“It wasn’t personal. He loves his wife, and if they find anything, he’ll owe me.”

“Is there something you know that they don’t?”

“There’s a look,” he says shortly. “Not just a smell. I ran into her at the coffee shop a couple weeks back, and she had it.”

“He will begin to think that you are friends if you are not careful, Will.”

“I’m an empath,” he says sardonically. “Do you really think I’m not aware of that, Dr. Lecter?”

That night, Will sits in his chair surrounded by his dogs and closes his eyes, trying to make sense of it all. He is sorry about Abigail, but she’s better off this way. Alive, anyway. With any luck, she just might stay that way. His fingers trail over Winston’s head, fondling both perky, perfect, attached ears.

His phone rings. He opens his eyes and leans over and picks it up.

“Graham."

“Good evening, Will,” Hannibal Lecter’s voice says pleasantly. “I just wanted to check in and see how you are feeling after the trip back. You were ingesting quite a lot of aspirin.”

“I’m fine, thank you, Dr. Lecter. How are you doing?’

“Very well. Have you actually booked yourself into the hospital yet? I have connections there yet who would be happy to facilitate things, should you wish.”

Will pulls back from the phone and regards it, before returning it to his ear.

“I’m fine, thank you,” he says again.

“And you have someone to take care of your dogs?’

“How do you know I have dogs?’

“The state and scent of your clothing *is* rather indicative.”

“I’m a grown man, Dr. Lecter. I think I can manage my affairs without your help.”

He can hear the other man breathing.

“I look forward to talking to you again,” is all Hannibal Lecter says. “When you are feeling better, Will.”

“Do you?” Will says. “That makes one of us. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go check on the tofu in the oven.”

And he hangs up the phone and buries his face in his hands, doubling over and laughing hysterically till his unmarked, unscarred gut aches.

Chapter 2

Will checks into the hospital late the next day, and is there for eleven more. After the fourth, he is feeling distinctly better, and, hopped up on good drugs as he is, and and tied down with tubes, relays and monitors, lounges back on his pillows, browsing the carefully personalized and tastefully over-indulgent luxury gift basket that, predictably, had arrived from one Hannibal Lecter earlier that morning. Accepted social etiquette mandates the in-person follow-up visit within the next hour, but the meantime, he is quite enjoying the given moment, never mind the scenery. A very much living, unsectioned Beverly Katz is seated cross-legged on the armchair beside him, helping him sort his haul.

“Not bad,” she opines. “Not bad at all. Two year subscription to ‘Field and Stream’, hand-made chocolate truffles, cookies and tarts, cashmere bed socks, batteries for your pre-loaded iPod, an iPod because we both know he knows that you don’t have one, and whatever’s in here.” She holds out a rather handsome antique tin box. Will takes it and opens it curiously. It contains hooks, feathers, shells, threads, beads, you-name-it: all manner of supplies, in short, for an artist specializing in fishing lures. She moves to the edge of the bed, sitting beside him in order to examine each of the individual packets as he lays them out on his blanketed lap. “So *thought* -ful! Some-body *liiiikes* you!”

“Somebody’s going to be sadly disappointed then,” Will says. “He’s not the only one who’s picky on what he puts in his body.” Beverly promptly sprays a liberated citron tart all over him. He rolls his eyes at her.

“Question for you,” she says, once she's recovered. “Where’d you learn to shoot like that so suddenly? I’m a good teacher, I know, but not that good, and my observations of you at the range? Don’t take this the wrong way, but you really sucked, till you didn’t anyway.”

“I guess I was feeling inspired. Do me a favour?’

“What’s that?

“Take a sample back of each of the cookies and the chocolates to Jimmy and Brian and ask them to test them for animal products. Butter’s okay. Lard and whatnot is not.”

“Huh?’

“Lecter brought me breakfast the morning we brought the Shrike down. Protein scramble with sausage. It didn’t occur to him that as we were hunting a cannibal, I might be temporarily turned off the idea of eating meat. I didn’t want to make him feel bad though, or thoughtless, so I just told him I was a vegetarian. Pescatarian, and that I could smell meat stock at a thousand yards. He looked both sad and challenged.”

“Oh. Alright.” She digs in the pocket of her little red jacket and pulls out a bundle of ziplock bags, taking samples of the requested and depositing them efficiently in bags and pockets “Are you? Pescatarian now, I mean? Because the boys and girls down the labs are working you up a gift basket of their own, and I can pass on the message.”

“I am,” Will says. “Actually.” He sets the magazine aside and reaches for his ginger ale. “So. How are you keeping?”

“Me?” She looks up at him, genuinely surprised. “Me me, or work me?’

“You you. Work…” He flicks his fingers. “Jack’ll be by soon enough to fill me in there, I’m sure.”

“Oh. Oh. Well, you know. Guys. Pfft.”

“If you say so. I’m one myself, so my perspective’s likely a bit biased.”

“I get all the dick I’m inclined to,” she translates. “But they are, sadly, rarely attached to real men, so that’s all she said.”

“Ah,” Will says, and following a sudden (longstanding, if ignored till now, and second chances *are* second chances, after all) impulse... “Want to catch a bite together when I’m sprung?’

“What?” Beverly blinks at him.

“You’re low key,” he says. “Easy-going… Dedicated to your work, but I get the impression that you would know how to leave it behind at the end of the day if you had a reason. And you have, at the risk of sounding the complete pig, a really smoking ass, which is an observation, not a request or suggestion, but I’m asking you now if you’re offended by the fact that I like to look at it. If you are, I’ll make the effort to stop. Can’t promise anything, but I will try.”

She gawps at him.

“You’ve been looking at my ass?’" she manages.

“There are side benefits to having that condition that mandates you avoid eye contact. You have to focus on something.”

She collects herself at that, and laughs.

“Ask me again when the swelling in your brain has gone down properly,” she says. Then, curiously… “Really? You like women?’

“You thought I didn’t?’

“It’s a topic of chronic speculation around the water cooler, let’s put it that way. And your social disabilities don’t make you come across as creepy and discomfiting, just shy and adorable. Serious fuck-me hair, and the eyes? Mm.”

“Stop,” he says dryly. “I feel so cheap and objectified!”

Beverly just snorts, and leans across to kiss him deeply and lingeringly. She’s surprisingly deft at working around the tubes. She also has excellent, excellent timing. Will tosses the

magazine he's holding aside and brings his hands up to cup her face, mm'ing around her grinning lips, just as a soft knock sounds and Hannibal Lecter steps in, his own pleasant smile straightening into that precise, displeased straight line faster than you can say 'Gotcha'. Bev isn't remotely perturbed, just pulls back, flushed, eyes bright and that curved, wide, half-open-mouthed grin stretching from ear to ear. Will grins back, and pats her jauntily presented rear as she turns to collect her things.

"Bye, Bevvy," he says as she winks at him and saunters out, goodies safely stowed in her pocket. 'Love to the boys."

"Get well soon, Will," she purrs. "Hi, Doctor Lecter. Bye, Doctor Lecter. Don't tire him out, now. His swelling's got a long way to go there before it comes down to manageable proportions."

Will laughs, loudly, and waves her out.

"A charming young woman," Lecter says. "Would it be rude to inquire?'

"We're friends," Will says. He deposits the various this-and-thattery in the basket. "Thank you so much for the basket. You put a lot of thought into it, and I really appreciate it."

"My pleasure," Lecter says. "May I?' He nods to the chair.

"Sure. Make yourself comfy." Will lies back, reaching for his glasses and settling them before retrieving his ginger ale again. "So. Where do things stand on the Shrike case?'

"Are you certain you wish to talk on it now? You are in treatment, and the subject is not exactly conducive to empathic relaxation.'

"Sure it is. A lot more so than it would be if I hadn't had that distinct pleasure of shooting out his kneecaps, anyway. How are Abigail and her mother doing?

Lecter studies him carefully. Will raises his eyebrows back at him, expectantly.

"Mrs. Hobbs is in complete and categorical denial," the psychiatrist says finally. "Largely due the to the confirmed contents of her freezer. She is, as it turns out, an excellent and enthusiastic cook, and rather naturally frugal as well. She encouraged her husband's hunting habits for budgetary, as well as culinary reasons, though with, it has been determined, absolutely no knowledge of his true prey. Alana Bloom is still in seclusion with the daughter, working with her to draw out the true story of her involvement. She is, I suspect in very poor condition; again, she undoubtedly helped her father as a living lure, but has been completely refusing food since she realized that the philosophy of 'honour your prey' typically is underlined by the subheading 'Waste Not, Want Not.'"

Will frowns. "She's starving herself?'

"She is restrained and receiving intravenous calories."

"What about Hobbs himself?'

“He is quite unapologetic, and has put in repeated requests to see his daughter. He is quite attached, and misses her terribly, to the point of the psychotic distressed.”

“Who’s on him?’

“I am.” It is not quite a challenge, but definitely not… Not one.

“Mm.” It is vague and noncommittal. Lecter sits back.

“Why did you lie to me, Will?’ he asks.

“Which time?’ Will asks, without blinking. “Specifically?’

“You told me that you had already been diagnosed with encephalitis. That you had undergone medical tests, and received your reports, and were in your gap week between diagnosis again, and admitting for treatment. That was not the case, was it.”

“Ah, hospitals,” Will sighs theatrically. “Such absolute hot-beds for gossip. I self-diagnosed, and you confirmed it for me. As for why I lied…” He drank ginger ale. “May I make an observation, Dr. Lecter, with prior warning that you might find it a little rude?’

“Of course. Forewarned is forearmed, and much more likely to be tolerated.”

“You’re a grade-A fancy control freak,” Will says bluntly. “And like to arrange everyone’s lives for them, no matter the occasion or how well acquainted with them you are. If I’d told you I only suspected my diagnosis, it would have been offering you license to offer your opinion, and to attempt to control the outcome. To suggest doctors, book appointments, offer unsolicited sympathy and quite possibly, with it, your fancy-ass equivalent of chicken soup. And we’ve determined, have we not… That I don’t eat chicken? You’re a psychiatrist, yes, my designated one, it would seem… But we’re not yet official, and till we are, my mind and brain are my own concern. After that… You can recommend all you like, but I don’t appreciate, and will not react well, to psychic driving.”

Lecter examines him again.

“I am not taking you on as a patient,” he says at last. “I will be referring you to an associate of mine instead.”

That makes Will blink.

“Why?’

“Because I do find you interesting,” Lecter says coolly. “And do not wish the restrictions of a doctor-patient relationship.”

“If I’m not ordered to, I have no obligation to socialize with you,” Will points out. “And frankly… No desire.”

“You will,” Lecter says, and rises to his feet. “Tell me, Will. How do you feel about the opera?’

“There are people there. People having emotions, and drawing on the occasion as an excuse to indulge in their emotions, and oh yes, other people, singing, most often badly, with their emotions and on the generalized subject of emotions. What do *you* think?’

And he nearly falls off the bed as Lecter actually, actually sniggers. *Sniggers!*

“You truly are charming,” he says fondly. “Despite your best efforts to convince me otherwise.” And Will nearly falls off the bed again as swift as a striking snake, Lecter rises, leans in, and...

“Oi!” He shoves him back. Hard. “What the hell, Lecter!?”

“Miss Katz cannot have been especially talented,” Hannibal - *Lecter,* dammit! - observes as he straightens, and straightens his tie. “If you cannot identify the particular action so soon after she offered you her version of the same. Good afternoon, Will. Feel better soon. I will be in touch.”

“I totally see what you did there,” Will snaps to his back. “Also? Brush your goddamn teeth next time. You ate meat right before you came here, just to see if I’d take note when you tested me, and again, to see what would happen next.”

“I am as essentially animalian as anyone else, Will. How else would I taste, when I am, in fact, made of meat? Try the chocolates,” his not-psychiatrist advises. “I promise, they are completely vegetarian.”

“And the rest?’

“I am certain that Miss Katz will give you the full report soon enough. Though from the taste of you, she may have already compromised you with the lemon tarts.”

He sinks back and fumes as Lecter slips out.

He is not aroused. He is not titillated. He is utterly *revolted.* How, *how* could he have missed…

Will bangs the bell. The nurse appears in short order.

“Yes, Mr. Graham?’

“Bring me my toothbrush,” he orders. “And paste and mouthwash, and fucking goddamned *bleach.”*

She looks politely confused, but obliges, though she takes the bleach as the metaphor it isn’t. Will scrubs and gargles and spits viciously, fighting back tears of absolute and complete …

He yanks the toothbrush out of his mouth. “Basin,” he manages, and barely is the word uttered before the basin is there, and he is vomiting hard and relentlessly, crying and crying and *screaming* with it, and the doctors are running in, and they are adjusting the IV, and there are soft, soothing voices, and the blood rising as a tidal wave over his eyes catches him and carries him into the dark agony of the void.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Thank you all so much for the lovely comments! Each and every one of them makes my day. :)

On Day Six, Jack arrives, with a grim, unhappy set to his mouth and a folder in hand that can only mean one thing.

The hobbits have raided Farmer Maggot's mushroom patch.

He's relatively restrained in his requests to borrow Will's imagination this time, but that's probably because Alana Bloom is standing between them, eyes blazing and arms crossed, positively *reeking* of furious disapproval and outrage at the man's presumption. Will just holds out his hand for the folder and gestures to the door.

"Don't strain yourself, Will," Jack says meekly. "Just… Whatever you could …" His voice trails off as a feral, dainty growl escapes the illustrious Dr. Bloom's throat. "We'll be right outside."

Will flips through the pages, scanning for the particular details he's looking for. He does not look at the photos. He closes the folder, waits five minutes, and calls out, "You can come back now."

The door opens.

"I'll explain the technical details later, but short form: you're looking for a pharmacist," he says, handing the folder back. "They were all diabetics. Look for the common denominator - the pharmacy that they all dealt with, and the guy who handed off their insulin, and you'll have your man. Better hurry, it's not like he has to go hunting for victims since they come right to him, so he's probably headed to the greenhouse co-op for the supplies for his next planned crop even as we speak."

Jack grabs the folder, and bolts, already hauling out his phone and barking orders.

Less than an hour later, Eldon Stammet is in custody. Alana is still there when the call comes through, sitting on the end of the bed and nibbling on the last of Lecter's (certified green) chocolate truffles as Will shuffles the deck for their next round of Hearts.

"You okay?" she asks as he deals the cards.

"Sure. Didn't even have to look at the images this time. It was all there in the text."

“What do you think was his motive?’

“No idea. You’ll have to ask him. I do prefer to read the numbers first,” he says. “Before the other. I always have. It just doesn’t always pay off. This time… It did. What’s in the bag?"

“Wha… Oh.” Alana slides down as he nods to the backpack that she'd dumped by the door when she'd arrived, and brings it over. “Just a few things from home. They’re going to want to keep you for another five or six days, so you might as well be comfortable.” She picks up the iPod off the night table as he reaches in. “What’s this?’

“It came with the truffles. You can have it if you want.”

“Have you even turned it on?”

“No. Guy’s a lousy shrink, Alana, really. I really don’t need more voices in my head in my condition.”

“And now you’re just being mean. What is it about him that irks your ass that badly?”

“Makes me puke, you mean?’

“We’re not even going to pretend to blame it on the drugs?’

“I was polite,” he says defensively. From her expression, he can tell that despite the reports, Hannibal obviously hadn't told anyone about the unwitnessed, provoking kiss... Will himself certainly isn't about to, so there is that much to be grateful for, at least. “I waited till he’d left. Haven’t you ever met anybody who just sets you off on every level when you meet them? He smells wrong,” he says. “Empathically speaking. Puts me on edge. He’s really, really intense, and wants to … I don’t know. He just... Puts me on edge.”

“He’s a good guy,” Alana says gently. “You know I wouldn’t have recommended him to Jack if I didn’t trust him, Will.”

“These things aren’t *rational,* Alana! You, of all people, should know that! I know you’re just looking out for me, but I don’t want to be around him, alright? There’s just something about him that puts me in a really, really bad headspace.”

“Will,” she says after a moment, and gets up and closes the door. Comes back and sits down. "This is me, alright? Not Dr. Bloom. Alana. Can I ask you a question, as your friend?’

“You’re going to ask it anyway,” he says, resigned. “Doesn’t mean you’ll get an answer.’

“Are you bisexual?’

Will turns his head and stares at her.

“What.”

“Are you bisexual.”

“I…” He stops, and takes a deep breath. “I’m going to say one thing, and then we are going to change the subject. Forever.”

She waits.

“Whether I am or not," he says carefully. "I would, and I apologize for the crudity, but there it is… I would rather fuck my entire pack of dogs than let Hannibal Lecter touch me sexually.”

“Welp,” she says after an astonished moment. “Alright, then. Though you could have just said ‘He’s not my type.’ I would have been perfectly okay with that. Good, even.”

“Aside from which,” Will adds, returning to the cards. “Even if he didn’t set me off, it wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?"

“Because I’m a top.”

“You… *Are?”* She looks shocked, and amusingly, intrigued.

“With guys, yeah. And I’ve heard all about his variety of dinner parties and I don’t have to be a psychiatrist to be able to read the subtext on his fetish for feeding everybody he meets his very special secret meat.”

She’s tired, he knows, and though she doesn't really need the excuse... She can’t help herself. She cracks up on the spot, shaking so hard with mirth that she tumbles off the bed, taking half the dealt deck of cards with her. He watches, amused, as she lies on her back, laughing till she cries.

“You’re horrible,” she manages finally. “Oh my fucking *God,* Will!"

“Is Abigail eating yet,” he says. Alana sits up, instantly sober, and picks herself up.

“No,” she says. “She’s not. And there have been complications besides.”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

"Three words. Or one, depending on how you spell it. Freddie Goddamn Lounds.”

“Jesus *Christ,”* Will says in disgust, and throws his handful of cards at the wall. “Can’t we just get the bitch on charges of willfully contaminating crime scenes and have done with? She’s got all that horrible hair, never mind the slime she drips everywhere she goes; she’s got to have left evidence lying around somewhere.”

“If we could, we would, believe me.”

“Tax evasion? It worked on Al Capone, and she’s no Al Capone.”

“We’ll see what we can find,” she says. “Seriously, Will, just give Hannibal a chance. One session, that’s it.”

“He’s the one who said he didn’t want me as a patient,” Will snaps. “It’s not down to me, is it, so you can lay off the guilt trip right now.”

“What?" Alana looks at him weirdly. “No he didn’t. He told Jack very specifically on the same night you brought down the Shrike that you’d told him straight up that it wouldn’t work, and that he could send someone else along.”

“I may have a parboiled brain, Alana, but… No. I did not. I would have, but he beat me to it.” His eyes narrow. “Who’s he recommending instead?’

“His own psychiatrist. A Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier. She’s already agreed, and is going to call you to set up a meet-and greet once you’re…”

“No.”

“You haven’t even met her, Will!”

“I don’t need to. If she’s Lecter’s shrink, every single conversation we ever have will get back to him one way or the other, whether she realizes it or not, so it’d just be his way of sitting on and directing the sessions without being bound by the doctor-patient relationship himself.”

“Seriously, Will? How can you *say* that? Hannibal Lecter is a complete and consummate professional!”

“He’s a complete and consummate control freak is what he is, and if you tell me that he’s not lending you his ever-so-comforting shoulder and ear as you tend to the daughter and he tends to the father…” He sits back. “Let me guess. Dr Du Maurier’s treating Mrs. Hobbs, am I right or am I right?’

Alana sighs. Will’s mouth hardens.

“Will…”

“No. It. Is. Not. *Happening.”*

“Fine,” she says crabbily. “Be like that. There's always Dr. Chilton.”

“Dr. *Frederick* Chilton? That strutting, pompous, lip-smacking little weenie-bean over the BHCI with the sideline of pimping out his patients’ neuroses to the Psycho-Thriller of the Month Club?”

“The very one.”

“I do believe I hate you, Dr. Bloom.”

“One session,” she coaxes. “One. Come on. Don’t make me pull out the big guns.’

“It’s not the guns, it’s the knives. And what are you talking about now?"

“There’s a reason Jack came straight to you for answers today instead of waiting for everyone else’s analysis. He wanted quick answers so he could take a bit of time off himself. Bella Crawford’s been admitted,” Alana says. “Down in oncology. Lung cancer. She’s had a bit of a lingering cough for awhile, and your advice lit a fire under Jack’s ass. He pulled the 'I know I’m a big dumb lout, but I love you, and if you love me, you’ll humour me’ card.”

Will presses his fingers to his eyes. The memories of blood drip down his fingers, and his gut hurts again.

Abigail's not eating.

That was not my design. She was supposed to live.

And now he’s inside Garrett Jacob Hobbs’ head. Doesn’t even have to coax the man to his knees with it, because he oh-so-conveniently hasn’t got any left. And with Bedelia and Alana feeding him everything he could ever want to know, one way or the other again, on the rest of the family, and with Jack ever so conveniently distracted...

All the Chesapeake Ripper needs to round off his bloody tea service and seating plan is me.

“Fine,” Will Graham says. “One session. But not at his office. He can come here. You can do me a favour first though.”

“Anything.”

“Get me a bottle of aftershave. I don’t care what brand it is as long as there’s a ship on the bottle.”

She gives him another weird look, but…

“Alright,” she says. “Will? Can I ask you one last question? Unrelated, I promise."

“Sure.”

“When did you realize that the Chesapeake Ripper might be a cannibal?’

Will shakes his head in confusion. “What?"

“Hannibal mentioned it when we were talking earlier. He said that you were discussing Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and talking on similarly themed cases in the car - free associating, like - and that the Ripper came up. He’s always had a clinical interest in the case again, and said he’d read that the Ripper liked to take organs alright, but he’d never heard anything on the theory that he was eating them. And that you’d presented the fact to him as if it was an officially established and accepted given.”

Will Graham stares at her as he struggled to digest that particular tidbit.

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

They don’t know yet. They. Don’t. Know. Yet. *They know he takes organs, but no one…*

I….

Won't… Didn't… Make the final connection there till after I was arrested. Till after I was arrested.

"Will?" Alana's voice is very far away. "Will? *Will!"*

"I'm alright," Will manages. "Sorry. Sorry. I don't...." He doesn't just pull, but hauls himself together, by sheer force of will. "I really don't remember, Alana. My mind just… It must have just… Jumped there. To the associative conclusion, and I'd forgotten about it till just now. I was riding a really bad headache that day, and was just trying to focus in the moment, and I don't remember… I didn't remember till now."

"We can talk about it later. For now… Lie down," she orders. "No, don't worry. I'll get the cards. Does your head hurt again?"

"No," Will says faintly. "Not really. No, my head's fine."

"Well, that's something, anyway." She hesitates, then leans in and kisses his forehead chastely as she tucks the blankets around him. "You rest. I'm so sorry. I'm an idiot. You're sick, and I shouldn't have brought any of this up. I'm as bad as Jack, really."

"No, you're not. You're tired too. I'm alright," he says again. "Can you turn the lights out, Alana? And tell the nurses not to let anyone through, not till I wake up again? I just want to sleep."

"Of course." She pats his shoulder and collects the cards swiftly. "You sure you don't want the iPod? I'm not going to keep it, but mine broke, and I wouldn't mind borrowing it till I get the chance to buy a new one."

"No, of course not. Go ahead."

He closes his eyes, waiting till she leaves, and the door closes. He opens his eyes and stares at the ceiling.

That kiss wasn't a romantic gesture or a 'let's see what happens' moment. That was the fucking Kiss of Death from the fucking Godfather. *The head of the family, who is the only god who'll ever count for anything in his universe.*

I am so stupid.

I... We... Are all *dead.*

Again.

Just...

Shit.

Chapter 4

Hannibal, displaying uncharacteristic lack of consideration (if completely typical sadism), makes Will wait three days before calling in to book the appointment to discuss the details of the empath's own projected execution.

Those three days allow a great deal of time for Will to carefully review all of his conversations with the man on the day they took down the Shrike, and to come to the completely inarguable conclusion that he definitely, *definitely* screwed himself there, from every angle possible, in every orifice available, and without any assistance whatsoever.

There is no way - *no way* - that Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham concludes, has *not* processed that Will was well aware that he was sharing a table that morning, if not breakfast, with the infamous Chesapeake Ripper.

From the moment of Will's first refusal of the protein scramble (*didyoumakethesausageyourself*) to his exact and precise and extremely pointed analysis of the Ripper's personality *(heisthe benefactorIimagineheratherenjoysthatpositiononalllevels)* and unadvertised dining habits *(Meat'sbackonthemenu!),* to his negative response to Lecter's question on whether he has not informed Jack of his theories…. Never mind the open-armed, expansive invitation to call him back for a coffee to discuss matters and a potential goddamn *alliance* of sorts, once they've taken care of the Shrike and resolved Will's temporary health issues, anyway... All while warning the monster before him that it would be on his terms, and that he was well aware of his methods - psychic driving - that he'd used on his first victim, Miriam Lass, and that Will himself would not tolerate them…

And it wasn't as if Lecter hadn't made prompt and immediate note of the fact that he knew. There had been Will's comment on the the Ripper's gentlemanly nature, after all and how he was sure that the man would be happy to wait till he was feeling better to initiate a dialogue

"I look forward to talking to you again," Hannibal Lecter had said later that same evening, when he'd called to check in once Will was back in Wolf Trap. *"* **When you are feeling better, Will."**

To be fair Will thinks, he *had* been a bit rattled. The man *had* ripped his guts out with a linoleum knife less than a week before he'd woken back in Duluth, after all, sent back somehow through time to the day that things had really got started there for both of them. His subconscious mind had had to have just been *salivating* for the provided opportunity for the mutual bitter review on everything that had happened since that day the first time around. The headache and fever hadn't helped either.

Hannibal Lecter, though, had never concerned himself with 'fair'. Courtesy, yes. The occasional (alright, obsessive) urge to deal appropriately pointed poetic and aesthetic justice, yes.

'Fair,' definitely not. And the headaches and fevers and seizures and hallucinations had only ever served as entertainment. *Will's suffering* had served as his entertainment. Fodder for his

intellectual *curiosity.* Will's brain had literally been setting itself on fire inside his skull, and the only thing Lecter had concerned himself with was what symptom would manifest next, and how he could use it to make his own life more interesting. How he could provoke those symptoms and *manage* them, prodding here and prodding there, experimenting here and there, framing him for goddamn *murder* here and there, shoving him up that cement- lined, steel-barred, stinking asshole of an *insane asylum* for weeks on *end* here and there, and oh yes… Not quite last but most certainly not least...

Killing Beverly Katz, after Will had inadvertently and personally sent her straight to the monster's lair. He'd warned her to stay away from Lecter, in no uncertain terms he'd warned her, but it had been *Beverly.* Beverly, who could only have ever solved the case and exonerated Will in the only way she knew, in the way she was *trained,* that Will *knew* she had been trained… Up close and nose-to-nose with the suspected evidence.

And now Lecter had caught them kissing. And mentioned the lemon tarts, and contamination, and…

Will Graham had got the closest thing he had to a best friend killed once. Gift-wrapped her, even. Given a do-over… It was practically the first thing he'd managed again. This time, he'd sealed her fate with a kiss. It didn't matter that he hadn't intended it. *It. Didn't. Matter.*

In Hannibal Lecter's eyes, no one mattered, really. No one could. He wore his human suit well. Perfectly. Elegantly. But that had been all it had ever been, from bloody beginning to mad middle to mad *and* bloody end.

Will recalls his own thoughts as he watched Lecter lay out breakfast: *Way to lay it out on the table, was he always this unsubtle,* and is forced to concede the truth of the maxim: when you point a finger at someone else and look down, you'll find three more pointed at yourself.

At eight a.m precisely on Day Nine - the precise minute of the start of Hannibal Lecter's habitual working day - the phone on Will Graham's hospital night table rings. Will reaches over, with no particular sense of … anything, really, in his hopelessness, and presses 'accept call'.

"Hello, Dr. Lecter."

"Good morning, Will," the brisk, deep and pleasant voice greets him. "So nice to hear your voice again! How are you feeling? I do hope you're quite recovered from that nasty little bout of upset tummy that I hear you indulged in after we last saw each other?"

"Yes. Quite recovered. Thank you."

"Wonderful. Now. I have my appointment book right here in front of me. I'm afraid that I'm not going to be able to meet up with you till after next Thursday, but…"

"Dr. Lecter," Will says abruptly.

“Yes, Will?” There is absolute no sense of irritation emanating, however repressed, from the voice on the subject of the interruption.

“What happened to ‘I’m not taking you on as my patient'?”

“Ah. Well. That statement was for your benefit, not mine, Will. I have never had any real objections, but I do try to be a gentleman, and dignity is difficult enough to establish and maintain when one is wearing a backless hospital gown. Alana has informed me, though, that you conceded that your alternatives were not all that - I quite enjoyed your description of Dr. Chilton, by the way; I may or may not have actually snorted my wine out my nose, though I’ve told her again that if she ever confirms, I will have to puree her tongue and serve it to her for dinner - and as for Dr. Du Maurier… As I did witness your moment with Miss Katz, I am ashamed to admit that it never occured to me that you might be one of those gentlemen who does not prefer blondes.”

There is, Will decides abruptly, absolutely no more need for subtlety. Or manners. If he’s going out again, he’s going out with absolutely nothing, *nothing* left unsaid.

“You suggested Dr. Du Maurier well before you saw me kissing Beverly, Dr. Lecter. May we at least make the attempt to keep our mutual timelines straight?”

There is a small pause.

“That was very rude, Will,” Lecter’s voice says reprovingly. “You are well into your recovery stage now; you could at least make the attempt.”

Will rolls his eyes so hard they nearly fall out of his head.

“I could,” he says. “Yes, I could. More of that faux-chicken soup you sent over that evening might help things along there, though I have to ask, how many herds of garlic buds did you bleed dry for the cause?’

“Garlic is a natural anti-inflammatory. Good for the overheated brain. Best not to ask, it would quite shock you, I’m sure, and you’re very welcome. I’m glad you enjoyed it; may I assume then that you actually trusted my good intentions enough there to eat it, and are not just soothing my benefactorial compulsions?”

Hello to you too, Mr. Ripper, sir.

“I did,” he says. However murderous Lecter’s eventual intentions, Will had been fairly certain that the man wouldn’t poison him while he was in the handy hospital. With all the doctors and diagnostic equipment present, it would have defeated the purpose. Never mind the chance of lingering toxins contaminating meat that would, again, when it came down to it, be more pragmatically harvested at the more convenient date. “It tasted a lot better than you did.”

A small, exhaled sigh sounds at that.

“I’m sorry,” Lecter says. It is positively *artfully* sincere and repentant. “I acted on an impulse. Not without prior consideration… But my timing was appalling, to say nothing of petty, and my approach exceedingly crude.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“May I ask you a question?’

“You’re the shrink.”

“This is a question from the man, not the psychiatrist. Was my kiss truly unwelcome? Because… And I have thought on the implications very carefully, and have determined that the best way is to simply ask directly… You did say, and I quote, “Next time, brush your goddamn teeth first.”

“So? I…”

He stops abruptly.

“As you say,” Lecter says. “And said. Quite the slip of the tongue, if you will excuse the expression.”

Will inhales deeply.

“I’m really, *really* trying not to be rude,” he says. “But... “

“Are you interested in pursuing a real relationship with Miss Katz, then?”

Danger, Will Graham-Robinson. Danger.

“Bev and I are friends,” Will says carefully. “We don’t know each other that well.. But sometimes you do meet someone that you’re just naturally comfortable around. I‘ve not met a lot of those in my life, and those that I have… They make my life bearable, Dr. Lecter. They make being *me* bearable. On the days…” He closes his eyes. “On the days the china cracks… They hold me together. I had a friend once, that … Beverly reminds me of her, a great, great deal. There was nothing romantic between us. But she was my friend. I miss her. I miss her with every breath I take. I always will, no matter how many people I hold in my heart now, or in the future. I would have liked to have her in my life forever. To have all the people I love in my life forever, and together, with the mutual appreciation and understanding that when you’re hosting a dinner party and you have too many prospective guests for the size of your table… You don’t have to exclude anyone. You just add an extra leaf or two, and bring in the extra chairs, and introduce everyone to each other, and … And become more of a family.”

There is silence on the other end of the phone.

“And you can see no place for me at your table?" Lecter’s voice says finally. “Even eventually?"

Will palms his eyes with his free hand. His gut aches.

Nothing left unsaid. Well, then. Here's something to choke on.

"You don't make me feel safe," he says bluntly. "I'm sorry. In your hands… I knew someone like you once too. He didn't just.. Not hold me… He dropped me. No, he threw me down and crushed me underfoot, and held the bloody, blooded dust of me at the last, and told me it was my fault in the same moment he told me he loved me. He used the same words to say both. And alright, I wasn't… I wasn't totally without blame, we had a real knack for hurting each other, but that's always what it came down to for me. I didn't feel safe with him. Because I'm an empath and he wasn't, quite the opposite really, and nobody else was ever safe with him, and I couldn't get *away* from them; I never can, and no matter how much he said he understood that… He didn't. He just found it interesting. Clinically interesting, and something to be experimented with. He might have loved me, but he couldn't understand the other, and so in the end… He couldn't have been expected to see, or detect, or differentiate, between the blurred lines. In the end, because of what I am… I couldn't either."

Lecter's breathing sounds softly.

"I don't know that I could ever get past the associations," Will says painfully. His eyes are tightly closed. "No matter… For better or worse… I'd appreciate it if you'd accept… Or try to… That it … *This* … *Is* my choice. That you're my choice, rather than the other way around. *It has to be that way,* if you ever want any hope of me inviting you for dinner… *You have to wait for me to send you the invitation.* You'd have to do nothing at all in the meantime to encourage or incite it, because doing something would be absolutely, absolutely contraindicated. Just live through the moments, as we interact in them or not, without trying to manipulate them, or me, and wait and see what happens. And nothing, *nothing* you've done so far, has demonstrated to me that you have that capability in you. Or even.. Like him, *just* like him… The barest ability to understand what I'm really saying."

"For you," Hannibal Lecter's voice said quietly. "For you, Will Graham… I would try."

Will's eyes fly open, wide. *He cannot* possibly *have said that, he..*

"What?" he hears himself say uncertainly.

"I must go," Lecter says. "I have an unexpected plane to catch. Certain unexpected business, that I'm afraid can't wait. Think about this, while I am away… Whether or not you are truly willing to accept the one appointment with me, or whether or not you are simply saying it because you think your alternatives are unacceptable, and you have no choice. I don't want to be an echo from a past that holds you hostage, Will. I don't want to be a choice that you feel you have to make, on any level."

"Alright," Will says, still bewildered, and then, spontaneously, in spite of himself... "Dr. Lecter."

"Yes, Will."

"Be careful. Wherever you're going. There are a lot of monsters out there, yeah?"

He can almost *see* the straight line of the thin lips soften a little.

“I am well aware,” Lecter says. “And am prepared, as I always do try to be, for all eventualities. I don’t always succeed, but then again, I *am* still standing.”

“So you are,” Will says, and in spite of himself *again* … “Talk to you soon.”

“Again. As you say. Be well, Will. I look forward to receiving your call after you are fully recovered and we are both available to discuss the particulars. Don’t be worried if you must leave a message, I check both my voicemail and machine regularly, and will be as prompt in responding as I’m able.”

The phone clicks softly. Will stares at the silent device in his hand, utterly *flabbergasted.*

“What. The. *Fuck,”* he says aloud, finally. “Was *that?’*

“What was what?” Beverly pokes her head in, wide grin stretching. She’s stopped by every day since her first visit, on her way to work. He is, as the saying goes, becoming accustomed to her face.

“Fucked if I know. My brain hurts.”

“Aw. Want me to kiss it better? Or am I going to strangle myself on your tubes again?”

“Nope.” Will holds up his bared arms. “Pinocchio’s officially a real live boy again, at least by day. They plan to reattach the strings at night.”

“Woot!” She’s on the bed in a shot. “Just so you know, I want nothing from you but your body.”

He pokes his lip out at her humorously. She laughs and nips it playfully in between wet, deep sultry kisses.

“You’re in a good mood,” he says as they finally pause for breath, and she snuggles her way under his arm seductively. “Atypically so, even for you. What gives?’

“Ah. It’s why I came. You distracted me. I have,” she informs him. “Absolutely *fantastic* news.”

“”I could use some. Tell me, tell me!”

“We got a call not one hour ago from the St. Louis PD, down in Missouri. Distance shot, but… Jack’s sure enough that he’s hopping a plane right now and going in himself. If it pans out, it’s going to be the Gotcha of the century.”

“What?” Will sits up. “What’s going on?”

“Miriam Lass - the FBI trainee who disappeared two years ago while chasing down the Chesapeake Ripper - is still alive,” Beverly says. “Son of a bitch took her, but for whatever reason… He didn’t kill her. Some Peeping Tom got arrested and they found the shot with a bunch of others on a routine scan of his computer, after lining it up with the FBI Missing

Persons image bank. Street shot through an attic window, with the house number and street sign right there, clear as day."

Will's mouth hangs open. His eyes are wide and shocked.

"I know, right?" Beverly says. "There *is* a fucking God."

"Did he take Lecter with him?" Will demands. "He just called me and told me he had to catch a plane too. Do you know if it's the same one?"

"Yeah. He's the best available, since Hobbs isn't going anywhere now, and who the hell knows what the sicko put her through? And he's completely ripped and trained, so we don't have to worry about him being the weak link in a physical fight."

What the hell *is that son of a bitch up to now?*

"Did she look okay? Lass? Physically? From what they could tell?"

"Full frontal, head to thighs," Beverly confirms. "And she was standing, so all arms and legs all present and accounted for, anyway. No scarring on the gut either, so… It looks like she's intact."

"That…" Will struggles, holding his head. "Is not what I expected to hear today."

"Well, I know where you men keep your brains," she says. "So if it's swelling again… I'm no doctor, but I can help you with that much anyway."

"Um. Don't take this the wrong way… But, ew. On your behalf, not mine. I haven't had a proper shower since they hooked me up, and bed baths, however efficient the nurses, are just not the same."

"Aw. Want me to help you with that? I have plenty of time."

"And again, I thank you, but the latex supply in this joint only extends to the medical gloves, Special Agent Katz."

"Pfft." Beverly reaches in her pocket and holds up a packet. Her bright, dark eyes dance with enthusiasm and joy and excitement, and she's so beautiful and so purely alive that Will could cry with it. Instead, he just hauls her in again and kisses her for all he's worth, and when they part, they are both crying and laughing like idiots. In that moment…

In that moment, and just for that moment, maybe, but it doesn't matter, *it doesn't matter.*. All thoughts of the past/future Hannibal Lecter and all associated pain and fear and regrets fade from Will Graham's mind like old blood scrubbed clean, leaving only the gift of the impossibly perfect, reborn moment. The gift of the moment, and of his friend in his arms, the friend that he'd sent to her death at the hands of the monster, and she is laughing and warm and *alive,* and...

"Yes," Will says. "Yes. Here, help me up. Also… You may have to do most of the work. This time, anyway."

“Not a problem. This time,” and she slings an arm around him, under the gown, not over it. “Mm. Very, *very* nice. Or should I say… Gotcha?”

The bathroom door closes firmly behind them.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> You guys are amazing. :) Know that every one of your comments is eaten right up, avidly albeit graciously, with fava beans and a nice Chianti. :)

The car comes at four p.m the same day, Baltimore time. Will looks up from the table and the lure he is working on - Alana has brought in his working supplies to supplement those provided him in Lecter's gift basket - to a quick, crisp knock and the sight of a brisk, middle-aged woman in his doorway. She looks like a perfect amalgamation of every librarian he has ever met.

"Yes?' he inquires.

"I'm your ride," she informs him.

"Are you?" Will twines a thread deftly and snips it off. "Isn't that nice. And where are we going again?"

"To a party." She surveys him. He has graduated from the hospital gown to the one of the outfits from the backpack of comforts that Alana brought him from home: a pair of flannel pajama pants and a once dark blue, now dingy grey t-shirt. It has a faded image of Snoopy in aviator glasses, helmet and scarf, riding his doghouse and underscored by the slogan 'DOG IS MY CO-PILOT'. "And it's not what I'd call formal, but you're still going to need something a little more upscale than that."

Will examines her again. Even as he does so, his phone rings. He sets his scissors down and reaches over to retrieve it. It's a text from Beverly.

Go with her. :)

He rises to his feet and goes to the narrow cupboard holding his now-laundered clothes from the day he was admitted: black jeans, a white t-shirt and a dark green zip-sweater . He gathers them up, along with fresh underwear and socks from the supply he'd brought with him, and slips into the bathroom. When he emerges, the not-librarian is waiting with a wheelchair.

"I'm okay," he says automatically.

"SOP. You're not being released, you're just going for a walk about the grounds. Your doctors understand the value of fresh air and exercise. Sit."

"Woof." She offers him an austere, unamused look at that. "I mean, yes, ma'am." He toes on his shoes, and sits obligingly. The not-librarian pats his shoulder, and wheels him down to the

elevator. When they reach the parking lot, they are met by a man who looks like a perfect amalgamation of all of the managers of all of the middle-grade grocery stores Will has shopped at in his life. He, too, is pushing a wheelchair.

"Bella?"

"Hello, Will," Bella Crawford greets him. "Do you know what's going on? I just got a message from Jack, telling me to go with him." She nods to her amalgamated manager. "No details, though. You?"

"Spoilers," the not-librarian scolds, not quite indulgently, before Will can say anything. They are wheeled out to the side lot and a large silver sedan. "In you get now, both of you.'

They oblige, carefully. Bella eyes Will sideways as he buckles himself in. They didn't know each other at all before they both were admitted, but she'd dropped by his room on Day Seven and introduced herself. Will hadn't known what to say, really - he was there in recovery, after all, and she undoubtedly had processed by that point that, with a diagnosis of stage four lung cancer, she wasn't… But Bella Crawford is, as she had been in the last version of her life, a quintessentially graceful and gracious woman, and they'd spent a really quite nice couple of hours with Lecter's antique box as he taught her how to make a basic fishing lure. He'd gone down to oncology to say hello himself the next day, on his mandated shuffle-about, and hers had been hanging from her IV pole.

"Should I ask?' she inquires.

"No. And yes, I know. It makes me look fifteen."

"I quite like it. What does Beverly think?'

"How…"

Will decides not to finish that sentence. "It was her idea," he says. "Actually… I lost a bet with her this morning. The beard was my forfeit."

"I see. And the hair?"

Will runs his hand over his head, clipped not-quite close on the sides now, and fashionably tousled on top. "I lost another bet."

"Oh dear." Bella Crawford pats his knee sympathetically.. "You *have* had a bad day."

"No," he says. "No, I haven't. I won bets three through seven. After I realized she was cheating, anyway, and applied appropriate counter-measures."

She laughs, and leans her head back, closing her eyes.

Ninety minutes later - at five thirty-nine p.m Baltimore time, or more accurately, seventeen thirty-nine Quantico, Virginia time, they pull up to the gates of the FBI Academy, and are ushered straight through. The not-librarian pulls out the chairs when they reach their destination, and wheels them straight through the halls to one of the main conference rooms.

The biggest one: the one with the mounted near-movie screen on the wall, and the extra snazzy security locks on the doors. The rookies call it Azkaban, because whoever goes in, never goes out again - not with anything they've learned on the inside anyway, or the Dementors will be the least of their worries. Just as they are wheeled in, Bev, Jimmy and Brian all come pelting down the hall, skidding in behind them.

"Bev?" Will asks. "What's going on?' He looks around. The room is packed. Most of the faces- not all of them, but most of them - look as confused as Bella.

"Beverly," she says. "Is Jack coming? Where's Jack?"

"In St. Louis." Bev's face is alight with fierce, nervous excitement. She ignores the seat saved her by her team, and sits on the arm of Will's chair. He wraps an arm around her firmly.

"St. Louis, *Missouri?'*

"Quiet, please," the not librarian says, in that no-nonsense voice. "First things first. I don't need to tell you, I'm sure, of the consequences of discussing what goes on in this room outside of this room? You'll be able to discuss the related particulars with anyone you like soon enough, but this particular *meeting* never happened, *capice?* You're on invitation, as a courtesy, all of you."

As if in punctuation to her warning, the locks on the doors snick shut, right behind the last figure slipped in- Alana Bloom. Murmurs of acknowledgement sound as she makes her way over and sits in Beverly's reserved, unoccupied seat. She shares the other woman's fierce, excited look. She also looks absolutely terrified. Will glances around once more…

And it hits him. Almost every single person there is of a certain age. Miriam Lass's age. This is her class. Her class, and her teachers, and every single person who worked with her, and suffered through her funeral and the unresolved aftermath.

Bev's arms tighten around him as his body stiffens with the abrupt understanding, and...

"Shhh," she murmurs in his ear, helping the soothing tone along with a gentle, distracting and eminently discreet nibble.. "I'm here for you, babe. Happy thoughts. Close your eyes and listen to the shower running."

Will breathes, and closes his eyes, and breathes again, and the rushing sound of the shower begins, and she deliberately tosses her hair, and her scent fills his nostrils, and evokes a series of quite vivid associated memories. Slowly he calms and refocuses... He kisses her cheek in grateful thanks. She offers him a quick, wide grin. He slips his arm around her, and pulls her directly into his lap. She settles comfortably. Alana raises an eyebrow at him, but returns her attention immediately to the front - for approximately three seconds. She turns back immediately.

"You shaved your beard!" she says, astonished, to Will. "And cut your hair!"

"I lost a bet," Will corrects. "Two of them." Beverly Katz smirks, cat-like. JImmy and Brian sigh in tandem.

“She only wants you for your body,” Brian informs him. “Just so you know. She’s a crazy wild woman who’ll take you for the ride of your life, but she’s a complete aromantic.”

“Are you really?” Will asks her, distracted.

“I am,” Bev says. “I’m happy to bone you at every opportunity, and we’ll be pinky-sworn buds forever, but you’re going to have look for the hearts and flowers elsewhere.”

“Didn’t you two just meet?’ Alana asks. Bev shrugs.

“You know your predestined pinky-sworn buds when you meet them,” she says. "What more is there to say, really?"

“Hearts belong in their original owners,” Will tells her. “Unless they’re cinnamon hearts. I accept those at whim. And flowers… Meh. In our line of work, they’re usually there to cover the smell of something else.”

The lights dim a bit. The movie screen glows. It takes a moment for Will to process what he’s seeing - Dr Hannibal Lecter, emerging from a car, locking the door, and moving purposefully down the sidewalk towards a destination - a large house at the end of a bland, quiet, tree-lined street. There is not another soul in sight. That does not mean, of course, that no one else is there.

“We’re feeding this live from St. Louis, Missouri,” the not-librarian says. “Through cameras installed discreetly around the site - extremely discreetly - earlier this morning. Ladies and gentlemen, we have found the Chesapeake Ripper. And we are about to watch him go down, live and in technicolour.”

Wild clamour breaks out, and silences just as immediately at the librarian’s microphonically projected and warning cleared throat.

“Dr. Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper?” one of the trainees says blankly. “Really?” Will nearly chokes.

“No,” the librarian says. “The Chesapeake Ripper is a former patient of Dr. Lecter’s. That patient’s name is Francis Dolarhyde: 36 years old, caucasian male, six foot two inches, estimated one hundred ninety to two hundred pounds, and an extremely rare twice-focused psychopath."

“A… What?"

“Twice-focused psychopath,” Will says involuntarily. All eyes turn his way. “It means he’s essentially two serial killers in one body, with two brands of victims. As the Ripper, he concentrates on the certain demographic, and style of killing. As… Whatever the name of the second, alternate killer within… He has completely different reasons for selecting the targets he does, and uses completely different methods to kill them. He’s not split though. The two killers within him know each other. They work together, as complementaries, for complementary and related, if not identical ends.”

“Precisely,” the not-librarian says. “Thank you, Mr. Graham. Though, in this instance, Francis Dolarhyde’s two murderous identities do not co-exist; the one - the Chesapeake Ripper again - has been a necessary predecessor for the other. Dr. Lecter was able to identify him as the Ripper once he’d reviewed the specifics of the second killer’s first public venture, and recognized Dolarhyde’s related, then-still-latent fantasies, imparted him in therapy two years ago, come to life. Dr. Lecter immediately reviewed his case files, and with help of one final, inadvertent and unrelated burst of inspiration provided him via the Minnesota Shrike, was able to spot the umbilical cord connecting the Ripper to a recent crime scene here in Baltimore, and the advent of Ripper’s newly born murderous successor. We’ll get to those details in review, but to summarize and emphasize... Dr. Lecter would literally not have been able to make that connection till that successor manifested as something other than a passive fantasy in Dolarhyde’s mind. So… When, two years ago, he and Francis Dolarhyde parted on amiable terms, when Dolarhyde, as a temporary resident of Baltimore, departed the city shortly after Agent-In -Training Miriam Lass disappeared, all information and confidences imparted him - Dr. Lecter, again - in Dolarhyde’s sessions were indicative of a completely different, again latent, psychotic profile. Dr, Lecter missed nothing. He diagnosed Dolarhyde as latent because because at that point, the second killer within him - the face he presented to Dr. Lecter - *was* latent.. He never brought his identity as the Chesapeake Ripper up in therapy, or dropped clues, because in his mind, the second killer was the real man, the true Dolarhyde, and the Ripper was his necessary predecessor - the one who literally provided him with food for his passage to murderous adulthood.”

There is a deep pause as that processes.

“He ate them,” someone says sickly. “The Ripper ate the organs he took as trophies. The clue provided by the Shrike case… Garrett Jacob Hobbs was a cannibal. And so was… Is… The Chesapeake Ripper. He ate…”

Faces twist all over the hall as Miriam Lass’s friends and classmates and colleagues realize the implications of that.

“He did,” the not-librarian says. “And I know what you’re thinking. That’s why you’re here. Not just to witness the Ripper’s reckoning, but to have a chance to process privately - and together - what you’re about to witness, before it goes public. We all attended Miriam’s funeral. Today… We’re getting a miracle. We’re getting her back.”

Blank looks abound.

“Miriam Lass isn’t dead,” she says. “We’ve got definitive proof, provided us by the SLPD that Francis Dolarhyde did abduct her… But never killed her. For reasons again to be explained upon review, he kept her alive all this time. Alive and intact, and, Dr. Lecter is positive, even kindly. As kindly as he was able anyway.”

“What?”

She just gestures to the screen. Hannibal Lecter is now climbing the steps of Dolarhyde’s house. The gathered audience watches, enraptured, as he squares his shoulders, and presses the doorbell. Will can’t help but notice that he is dressed, not in his typical three-piece suit, but in comfortably fitting slacks, solid shoes and and a simple if yet dressy shirt and

waistcoat combo. The shirt is tucked, and the sleeves rolled to the elbows. He is going in prepared for a physical fight.

“Wait, they're sending him in *alone?*” someone says, alarmed, suddenly, and admittedly belatedly. “He’s a civilian! He's not trained! He doesn’t even look like he’s got a weapon!"

“He doesn’t need a weapon,” Will says, again involuntarily. Again, all eyes turn to him. “He *is* the weapon. He’s a trained martial artist, probably better than anyone here. And Dolarhyde trusts him. It’s all part of the set-up. Lecter’s already contacted him, telling him he’s recognized the second killer’s birth. Dolarhyde wanted him to. That’s why he came to Baltimore to commit the related murders in the first place. He was showing off to Lecter. Showing him what he’s become. That he’s succeeded in his version of therapy, because he values his opinion. For whatever reason… In the time they were together as psychiatrist and patient… Dolarhyde imprinted on him, as a lost duckling. He’s just been admiring from afar till now. He thinks he’s safe, because even if Dr. Lecter disapproved, he wouldn’t be able to tell. Doctor-patient confidentiality. That’s true. But Dr, Lecter isn’t telling about anything he learned in therapy, is he? He’s telling about the Chesapeake Ripper - a man that he never treated. A man who just happened to inhabit the same body as the second killer, Dolarhyde’s body… But who never asked for Dr. Lecter’s advice or help.”

Alana reaches out and takes the stunned Bella Crawford’s hand, startling her into active awareness and action.

“Where’s Jack?’ she demands, sitting up sharply in her wheelchair. *“Where’s Jack?"*

“He’s there, Mrs. Crawford,” the librarian reassures her. “But he’s not showing his face yet. First… Dr. Lecter is going to draw Dolarhyde out. Soothe him a bit, and get him to lower his guard. Miriam’s in there, and we’re not going to risk losing her now, not now that it’s come down to it. Don’t worry. All contingencies have been covered. Nobody’s going down today but Francis Dolarhyde.”

On the huge screen, Hannibal Lecter raises a hand and presses the doorbell a second time. His posture shifts slightly, lazily, loosely. He tilts his neck. Will can almost hear the luxurious, anticipating crackle. Everyone watches as he cocks his head, and smiles very, very slightly.

“He’s heard footsteps,” someone whispers. “He’s coming.”

And they all watch breathlessly as the door handle begins to turn.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> All bolded/italicized quotes IN BRACKETS are quotes from the original TV show, or very slightly modified versions thereof (except for the last two).
>
> Bolded font is Will's memory-voice, speaking to projected Hannibal.
> Italicized bolded font is projected Hannibal's memory-voice, speaking to Will.
> Regular italicized font: flashbacks, projections, and WIll thinking to himself in the present.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the fraction of a second before the handle on the door turns, the pendulum behind Will Graham's closed lids begins to swing. *Back and back and back we go, where we stop, nobody knows,* he hums under his breath, feeling his heart slow and his sense of perception gradually shifting. *Back and back and back we go....*

The pendulum stops. When it settles, the numbers on Will's bio-temporal clock - the one that marks his passage as a mortal traveling in the one, eminently traditional direction from birth to death - are knocked aside and askew, out of order and shunted to one side as in a surrealistic, Dalian and fevered vision. All that has occurred between the points of chronology labeled Then and Now, while not quite erased, has been rendered personally irrelevant.

Will ceases his humming and opens his eyes. He frowns, blinking hard, and again. It does no good. Before him is nothing but shadow and darkness. It takes him just one more fraction of the incomplete second to process what is happening - that as this is not a re-enactment of established events, but a set-up in anticipation of events to come - Lecter's predetermined turn of events, in fact - he is looking in at the details of the as-of-yet-unrevealed Dolarhyde's domain through Lecter's eyes. Lecter is undoubtedly wearing a wire, but as there are no cameras facing in at this angle, and none, Will is sure, inside the house itself, his on-the-spot empathic analysis is going to be limited to what he *hears,* rather than what he *sees.*

The incomplete second rounds itself off as a voice sounds in in his memory, as clearly as if the man voicing the words were standing beside him.

(Do you know what an imago is, Will?)

(It's a flying insect.)

(It's the final stage of a transformation. Maturity.)

(When you become who you will be.)

***(An imago is an image of a loved one buried in the unconscious, carried with us all our lives*)**

(An ideal.)

Irrelevant, Will scolds himself automatically. *That conversation hasn't happened yet, for him at least. May we at least make the* attempt *to keep our mutual timelines straight ?*

(The concept of an ideal always searching for an objective reality to match. I have a concept of you, just as you have a concept of me.

(Is this what this is all about then? You want to take me beyond the concept? You want to be seen?)

(By you, Will, yes. I'll let you in. I'll let you know me. I'll let you see me.)

The explanation for the contradictions in their temporal reference points is simple enough. Lacking the one sense, the other four *will* seek to accommodate. Lecter is a doctor. A psychiatrist. He knows this, and more to the point, he knows that, in the absence of immediate visual input, the empath's skills that depend so exclusively on sight will, too, accommodate… And sure enough, behind the dark silky screen of Beverly Katz's hair, Will's blinded senses, thoroughly disoriented now, are finding themselves, for lack current context, supplying their own associative context from his established experiences with Lecter before the proverbial tea cup shattered.

(A rare gift I'm giving you. Do you want it?)

The darkness and shadows rise around him. He looks down automatically, seeing of course, nothing, only sensing the shape of, and the warmth emanating from, the sudden object in his hands.

Round and round we go, where we stop, only he...

(Do you want it?)

And when all is said and done… Because obviously, it *isn't* all said and done in the face of past appeared prologue, and since Will is, after all, sitting right there, with his arms wrapped around the murdered woman now sitting in his lap and leaning quite comfortably against his unwounded, unscarred belly…

He supposes he does.

Again.

(That, too, is my design.)

Lines do blur, Will thinks detachedly. *Was that last his voice, or mine?* In the darkness and the shadows, he senses again, rather than sees, the tiny gleam of white - the white of slightly

crooked, slightly overly sharp canines, or perhaps, a politely pristine chef's apron.

He lifts the cup to his lips. The shadows slip down, in the end, and in the revisited beginning, easily. Easily, and black as blood in the moonlight... The sound of his swallowing is as the renewed hum of the pendulum.

(To the truth then. And all its consequences.)

"Good evening, Francis!" Hannibal Lecter is saying on the screen. His back is to the cameras, and his voice is deep and pleasant: warm and reassuring. There is even a little laugh there. It sounds quite bizarre. "May I come in?'

"Dr. Lecter." The voice emerging from the invisible interior of the house is uncertain, so low it is almost a whisper, carried again through the wire that Hannibal is wearing. It is hoarse, gravelly, and a bit rusty. The identifying photo now juxtaposed in the corner of the screen shows the cause; Francis Dolarhyde - a not unhandsome man with a curiously blank and boyish expression - was obviously born with a cleft palate, and though mended more or less on the aesthetic level, his words emerge a bit oddly shaped. An anxious hiss sounds from Jimmy as further details from the projected photo of the suspect process… Dolarhyde is not only ten years younger and a good two inches taller than the man standing before him, but is, for all intents and purposes, formed from slabs of fleshly marble and granite. "What are you doing here?'

"Would you believe me if I said that I was in the neighbourhood and thought I'd drop by?'

Dolarhyde's breathing is audible, but he says nothing. Lecter's voice gentles. Still, the only thing to be seen on the screen is his back. "I'm sorry, Francis. I know this is unexpected, but I just… I couldn't wait to see her again. I've missed her so much, so I finished up my business in Baltimore early, and drove down. You don't mind, do you?"'

Will's brow furrows, confused, at that. His is not the only one.

He missed *her? Missed* Lass? *But… He's not supposed to* know *her at this point, and certainly not to the point where he'd rush off his schedule to see her again. No record of him crossing paths with her otherwise, only from the papers when he'd read about her disappearance.*

What…

He catches Alana's eye, as it seeks to catch his. She shakes her head lightly. *Wait for it,* she mouths. *It's coming.*

"No, no, of course not." Dolarhyde's voice recovers a bit. "I just wasn't expecting you till tomorrow morning. I'm not… We're not quite ready for you yet."

“Quite alright,” Lecter reassures him. “Many hands make light work. I can help you,” he elaborates as Dolarhyde breathes again. And, after another pause, again, in a precise echo, not just of words, but intonation, of his own greeting to Will at the motel less than two weeks ago … “May I come in?”

The adventure is yours and mine today, Will hears clearly in his head, as clearly as if delivered to him along a psychic, not just empathic link. **You’re not helping your own cause here, Dr. Lecter,** he sends back automatically. **What happened to ‘For you, Will Graham, I’d try’?**

In Will’s imagination, Lecter points out, as reasonably and clearly as if he were actually speaking out loud, that he had planned the expedition before Will laid down his ultimatum, and that he cannot, therefore, be expected to sacrifice the pre-booked tickets. As per European tradition rather than American, and in homage to the man’s culinary and genetic roots, Will flips him the double finger. In his imagination again, Lecter offers him that sad, reproving little glimmer of his, the one that says *‘I could cut those off, you know, this instant in fact, if I were inclined, and along with the rest of them, would have the base for a lovely savoury trifle.* It’s distracted though, and the sideways glance looks away immediately, into the peripheral darkness beyond Will’s line of sight, forcing Will with him, as he is his eyes again now, back to the frustrating shadows.

“She’s sleeping,” Dolarhyde’s voice says. “She had a good dinner, and I gave her her medicine, and she’s sleeping, Dr. Lecter.”

“We won’t wake her, then,” Lecter reassures him. “I’m ahead of schedule, as I told you, so there’s nothing to worry about, Francis. I just got a bit over-excited is all. Forgive me? I can come back in the morning if you’re more comfortable with that.”

“It’s alright. Come in.”

“Thank you.”

Round and round and round she goes, where we stop only he

And time stills as Lecter steps forward, and the cup in WIll’s hands is suddenly in pieces, slipping away. Piece by piece, fumbling in the dark, the pendulum swinging gently again, Will gropes and retrieves the shards, fitting them carefully and slowly till the whole is reformed in his hands. Uncracked and unscarred, it is perfect again in every way, exactly as it had been before its fall save for one detail - the re-etched pattern, identifiable now not by touch, but through Will’s recalled memories of light, reveals a ghostly portrait, not of St. Louis: Present, but of Duluth, Past.

Take this and drink, in memory of...

Oh, shut up, Will thinks crossly. He’s actually more amused than not at the sententiously intoned blasphemy, but he’s not about to admit it. Lecter of course, knows, but still. It’s the *principle* of the thing. **Your obsession with churches and roofs aside, that wasn’t anything but rude.**

The slightly crooked canines gleam at him as he lifts the cup again. More shadows seep through him, slipping behind his closed lids, colouring all in the tarnished, and tarnishing silver of that other, past and resurrected moon. When he lowers his hands again, he is standing in another door, one Italian leather-clad foot poised over the threshold. He hesitates, or rather waits, till

(Please. Come in.)

And he steps forward and Becomes.

Duluth, Minnesota

Two Weeks and a Lifetime Ago

The Other stands, clothed decorously and impeccably in the one-of-a-kind suit bearing the label 'Dr. Hannibal Lecter', just inside the door of the Hobbs' kitchen. Before him, sprawled in the shadows cast by her dead father, Abigail Hobbs, too, is bleeding out. Beside her, *Will Graham kneels, his dark and tattered eyes melting and flowing behind the blood-smeared lenses of his glasses: black water meandering around the crimson spray that spackles him as delicately and thickly as cherry blossoms. His hands are slick and slippery, visibly shaking as they scrabble to contain the pulsing gouts from the girl's throat. The Other can almost* hear *the younger man's heart skittering and skipping frantically: finest oil across a heated pan.*

The Other's external, human expression is blank, assessing, professional - not so much interested as considering. He observes the tableau before him a good thirty seconds more before regrouping, slipping into the present and the moment and mindful awareness as he comes forward and kneels gracefully amid the carnage. Large, elegant hands, perfectly tailored ('fearfully and wonderfully made' indeed), close over the girl's wound in a fastidious, yet ever-courteous, and of course, eminently effective manner.

And so comes, and passes, the one crucial moment where, save for the blood on his lenses, in his mouth, the massive, throbbing pain in his head, and the vision of Garrett Jacob Hobbs lolling slumped in direct eyeshot, the tendrils of dank smoke yet rising from his shattered torso, Will Graham might have processed the murderous vision not before him, but beside *him. This, too, of course, is the Other's design - or at least, it suits it. Every now and then circumstances do dictate that he improvise a bit in a given moment. Then again, occasional necessary improvisation is a fundamental element of all of his designs The Other is nothing if not thorough, and is a firm proponent of accounting for all possibilities. The devil, as the saying goes, is definitely,* definitely *in the details.*

Human beings, the Other has noted, are not especially interesting when happy. Their pain and suffering, on the other hand, does moderate his natural disassociation and disinterest there to the point where he is frequently moved to provoke it in those around him. It makes a quite pleasing complementary garnish, really, to his preferred dishes of luxury and self-congratulation, and he's always in for whatever alleviates his crippling and impatient boredom besides. The Other is bored a great deal. Chronically bored, even. It is, he reflects, an unfortunate occupational hazard of inherent natural superiority, never mind life as an

apex predator exiled to an eternity wandering the enthusiastically self-marketing and self-promoting buffet.

It would be all be quite intolerable, really, were it not for the one redeeming fact - the natives' perplexing ability to channel, and yes, create, that which does *fascinate, captivate and enchant the Other - the manifested Aesthetic. Music, literature, art… Simpering, uninteresting and bland as the individual and collective slabs of Hannibal Lecter's lunch meat tends toward, they do have an undeniable knack. Now and again, he even comes across one or two that present as a manifestation of Aesthetic themselves, in however small a manner, or whom he senses could be turned that way. The Other indulges himself with those. Interacts with them. Cultivates them. Charms them. Seduces them, even, savouring them to the very last possible moment in every way. It never lasts of course; it can't, but while it does…*

The Other prides himself, as he does on all things, that he is capable of real affection. It is, he believes, what separates him from those whom the experts define as socio and psychopaths, and places him firmly in the solely occupied category of *The Other. He is even, or could be, should he ever be motivated enough to make the effort, capable of love.*

The experts, of course, don't like to think on that. The very idea of a monster capable of love means, by definition - their *definition, anyway - that he is not Other at all, but simply wounded. Redeemable. And as they would know, instinctively, were they to see him, that 'wounded' and 'redeemable' do not apply to he that they identify as Hannibal Lecter, they would be bound to redefine the nature of all other things that* do *apply… Including love itself. And that…* There… *They simply cannot,* will *not, let themselves go. That would mean redefining, as God is purportedly Love… God Himself, and they are simply not ready for that yet - not to deny His existence, that's easy enough, but to allow themselves see Him for what He truly is.*

Not to put too fine a point on it, their brains would explode. And the Other, dressed as Dr. Hannibal Lecter or not, enjoys their brains as they are. Or rather, as he prepares them according to the whim of the day. He prefers to butcher his meat himself, and if he is in the mood for pureed brain, he'll manage the execution there himself, please and thank you very much.

No, the Other inhabiting the custom suit bearing the label 'Hannibal Lecter' is not wounded. No matter the unpleasant events of his life, and as he is fond of saying, there are no events that conclusively molded him into what he is now. Events occurred around him: unpleasant and distasteful ones, but when it comes right down to it… They didn't, and don't, define him. They simply…

Re*fined him. He* allowed *them to refine him. No, nothing happened to him to make him the way he is.* He *happened. He is the one who makes things the way they are. And if he chooses indulges in real affection, real camaraderie, real intimacy with those who deserve it (more than the rest anyway, as that's all rather relative)... That's his, as are all other things, his prerogative.*

The rest...

He stands in line with them. He walks among them. He loiters, strolls, picks his fastidious way through the grubby and distasteful landscape of the eternal swarming, moldering cafeteria, keeping an eye out for those few who shine. As for those who do not - those without the redeeming however nascent, virtue of aestheticism: those who simply grunt at him, and around him...

He remains unaffected by them. Indifferent to them. Their natural crudity and vulgarity displeases him, but on the whole, he is able to ignore them. They don't - can't - touch him, don't in fact, register on his radar at all

Unless and until of course, and in inevitable accordance with their unfortunate natures again…

They do.

"May I trouble you for some tea, Francis?" Lecter's voice is saying from his disembodied position in the darkness. Wrenched back to his own body and the moment, Will watches for a moment on the screen as, along the tree-lined streets, more doors open, of cars this time, and silent figures slip out, moving into position swiftly and quietly through the gathering evening: behind hedges, behind and in trees, under the cars again. He clears his mind and listens intently.

"I still have some of the box you brought," Dolarhyde says. "I don't have any other kinds. Is that alright?"

"Of course." There is the squeak of a chair settling comfortably. It must, Will reflects, be absolutely killing the man to sit and watch someone else prepare the refreshments. In his not-imagination, Lecter doesn't roll his eyes at him. ***Do get with the program, Will? I don't actually plan to drink it. Never mind my design, any man who doesn't keep tea on hand is by definition uncivilized, and the psychologically unsanitary rarely translates to anything but the physical complementary.***

Isn't he supposed to be an artist? They won't question the abject filth everywhere?

Have you never heard of the disorganized creative environment? Never mind that the Chesapeake Ripper's preferred mediums are blood, guts and pain, and he prefers the* al fresco *work space. Probably because there's no room to work here. Good* God, *this place is disgusting. Where's the plastic body suit when you* really *require it?

Does he have dogs?

No. He does, however, have an established and verifiable affinity for animals.

"Isn't the Chesapeake Ripper supposed to have advanced surgical skills?' Bella murmurs to Alana, right on cue. "The *precis* posted with the photo there doesn't say anything about that."

“He probably started off with animals,” Alana murmurs back. “And he was stationed in Japan, when he joined the military at seventeen. Hannibal says he’s always had a near-pathological appreciation for beauty and art as a result of his own deformity, and that he showed him a few sketches he did when he was in therapy with him in Baltimore and realized that they shared the hobby. Better at sculpting over drawing, he said, but he wasn’t half bad there either. His sense of anatomical proportion was spot on, never mind the manual dexterity he displayed in the finer details of the couple of little clay sculptures he worked up for him as they were talking, so he’s guessing he bought, or stole, a couple of anatomy textbooks, and practiced anonymously on any strays he came across. There are any number of them there - everywhere - of every species, who would never be missed, and then there’s that huge percentage of runaways or the homeless populations who just … Disappear, and are never found.”

“And he still never made the connection with the Ripper?’

“Dolarhyde’s primary presented psychotic pathological centers around established, happy families, not single, apparently random victims,” Alana explains, keeping an eye on the screen. The house sits blandly, exuding murmurs from whistling kettles, clinking china, soothing small-talk and anxious, neo-responsive grunts. “His fantasies on bringing them down were quite exacting and vivid, and didn’t include any kind of artistic embellishment. Bit of an oral fixation, but that wasn’t centered around eating them, but rather on biting and disfiguring them, as per his own oral deformity that caused him to be rejected and tortured on every level by his own relatives. As he was a child when he was sculpted into what he was, though… He had to grow up before he could take on the adults in his life effectively, and that’s where the Ripper sub-personality came in. He represents Dolarhyde at a time in his life when he wanted more than anything to be pretty - when he was obsessed with it - and needed special food besides, to raise him to the age where he could earn the money to get surgery to fix his cleft palate. He ate a lot of special food growing up because of the cleft palate again, right? Even so, it would have all only been theory without the last vital connection - the cannibalism - and that was down to you, Will, and your insight on the Shrike case. He's made sure you'll get credit for that, by the way," she added. "After the fact. At the time, though... You were sick, and Hannibal didn’t want you stressed, or upset or disappointed if he was wrong, and he wasn’t sure you remembered what you said anyway. He did note, as you did, that you’d had a really bad headache on the day. So... He told Jack instead, and me, and we all took it and ran with it."

“Start from the beginning,” Will orders, keeping an ear out. Dolarhyde is, fortunately, taking his sweet time with Lecter’s imported tea, and while it does give them time for the recap, if Lecter ground his teeth, he would be grinding them now... Not at the delay, but at the other man’s blatantly awkward mismanagement of his precious hundred-dollar-an-ounce gold-plated bone-and-ash roasted loose-leaf.

“Alright,” Alana collects herself, speaking rapidly and quietly. “Hannibal, as a forensic psychiatrist, former surgeon and art lover, has always had a professional interest in the psychology and methodology of the particular serial killer known as the Chesapeake Ripper. I wouldn’t call him obsessed, but after the last round, it became personal. Miriam Lass, as you know, was put on the case as a specifically and uniquely qualified agent-in-training during the Ripper’s last burst of activity. Jack assigned her to the job of hunting down any and all

former contacts of his last victim, one Jeremy Olmstead, however remote, that hadn't made it onto the primary interview list. As it turns out… Hannibal was one of them. He'd been the attending surgeon in the local ER, a few years back, and a search of Olmstead's public medical records showed that he'd signed off on Olmstead once when he'd come through for treatment of a minor hunting accident. So Miriam contacted Hannibal and asked if she could make an appointment to discuss the matter, and to see if he could remember anything that might possibly help track down Olmstead's killer. He agreed, they set up a time - but she never made there. Hannibal didn't think anything of it beyond his lack of appreciation for her lack of consideration, but in the end, just got on with his day. Later that week, after the APB was put out, he called in to report as a matter of courtesy, but the call for some reason was missed. It was on the log, though when they went back and looked two weeks ago, and heads are rolling for *that* one, believe you me - "

Of course they are, Will thought. Somehow, it doesn't surprise him one bit that Lecter has 'global- grade computer hacker' in his skill-set.

"But at the time, when they didn't do follow-up, he assumed that his call had been accounted for and dismissed, and let it be. After you said that bit about the Ripper eating his victims though, in Duluth again… Something clicked, and he went back home to look over his psychiatric patient files of that same period that Miriam disappeared, and came up with Francis Dolarhyde. He'd never considered the possibility of any kind of connection there before because though he'd diagnosed him as having mild-to-moderate psychopath tendencies, there was nothing that indicated he would ever go beyond his fantasies, none of which revolved around abducting pretty young women, but rather, with taking action against entire families, and dealing back the pain dealt him by his own family's callous disregard, abuse and abandonment of him as a child."

Will listens intently.

"After Miriam disappeared though, Dolarhyde told Hannibal he was moving back to Missouri. Once there, and out of treatment… He obviously evolved, even as he went undercover for the prudent period. Till the Shrike case got his attention, and he went nosing around and realized that Hannibal was working the case, and decided to say hello again, in the hopes that he'd recognize him."

"You're saying that he *wanted* to be caught?' Brian wrinkles his nose.

"No. He just wanted him to see him. In his mind… Even if Hannibal had known it was him, he wouldn't betray him. Couldn't. Partly because of the restrictions pertaining doctor-patient confidentiality though he missed the clause, obviously, on the exceptions made for active mass murderers - but mostly because he genuinely thought that they were friends. Some patients are like that," she says at the flabbergasted looks. "They fixate on someone that they identify with, to the point where it honestly doesn't occur to them that they could ever be in danger from them. And Dolarhyde identified with Hannibal on almost every level, when you take the rampant insanity out of the picture anyway. They actually had a lot in common in their interests: music, art, literature, fitness and health - cooking included -and he felt he'd found a kindred spirit, I suppose. Hannibal says that if he'd been sane, he might have thought him someone he'd have been interested in sponsoring, like the old school Europeans do to

artists and whatnot with lots of talent but no money. He was extremely intelligent, if shy and withdrawn, and with a bit of help and encouragement, he could have come out of his shell and really made something of himself."

"What would make him take Miriam Lass, though, in the first place?" Bella asks.

"Ah well. Dolarhyde had those two obsessions, as I've said. Beauty - aesthetics - because he was slightly disfigured himself: he'd been born with a cleft palate that wasn't repaired till adulthood, and families again. Hannibal… He told us that when he was young, he had a sister who died. He keeps an old picture of her in his desk, and was working on a series of sketches of her one session when Dolarhyde was there. He saw the sketches on the desk, and asked him about them.. Hannibal told us that he normally wouldn't have told him anything, but he was having a good day, and the etiquette lessons that he'd been sneaking into their sessions were seeming to take hold. And he didn't touch or pry, just asked if he might please have a closer look, Most people don't ask, he says, they just go over and start poking around. So he let him look, and I've seen them now. They're gorgeous. Museum quality. Probably some of the best work he's ever done, at any point in his life, if not the best. Dolarhyde saw the family resemblance, and asked who she was. Hannibal told him that she was his sister, that she'd died when she was four, and that her name was Mischa. She was blond with blue eyes, light eyes, and not to put too fine a point on it... Looked more than a bit like Miriam Lass might have as a little girl."

Will sits back as that processes. He'd had no idea, none, that Hannibal had ever had a sister, but he wasn't inclined to disbelieve that much of whatever wild scenario he was spinning anyway. It was the kind of information that would be far too easy to disprove. "Mischa Lecter," he says. "Miriam Lass."

"Got it in one." Alana nods at him in approval. "Dolarhyde had an appointment the morning she disappeared. We're postulating that he saw her heading in, and he was struck by the projected adult resemblance, and thought… Who knows what. She'd have had her ID on, and he'd have spotted her name. Maybe he'd got up the courage to ask if she was a first time visitor, and when she said yes, he thought that she hadn't died after all, and was coming to surprise Hannibal, and intercepted her, and decided to keep her for the right moment. When he was ready to reveal to Hannibal who he was himself. And he didn't hurt her like he had the others, because she was supposed to be a gift, at the proper time again. He just… Kept her on, longer than he'd intended to, because the Ripper did need to lay low for awhile, and she was a connection to him when they couldn't be together. As they none of them had other relatives… He probably hoped they could all be a family together. That Hannibal would offer him a place with them, a place he'd make for them, as a family."

Will holds his head, metaphorically anyway, reeling, remembering.

(I wanted to surprise you. I had a place for us. We would have been a family.)

Just how many years in advance do you think up these lines, Lecter, when you're positing and accounting and arranging all of your social experiments? And how many times have you used that one? On how many poor saps, as you…

I am so stupid. *To think that I thought…*

“It all fit,” Alana says. “And again… The cannibalism was the final clue. Hannibal said it honestly had never occurred to him, not once, even in passing, that Dolarhyde might be the Ripper. He has absolutely no medical training whatsoever, as you said, Bella, and had never… His verbalized fantasies on killing had never revolved around art or aesthetic recreations - the Ripper’s signature elements. What he *did* talk about a lot in therapy, outside of the context of killing, was internalizing art. The ability to internalize it as the sign of the sophisticated and superior intellect. Only it wasn’t a metaphor. And again in the end, he turned out to be a killer with two distinct types of victims: one that he told Hannibal about, and one that he didn’t.”

Despite his awareness that the story she’s telling him is utter bullshit, Will can’t help himself. Hannibal Lecter might be an absolute, utter asshole, but he is undeniably an artist on every level… The compulsion to unravel the artificial tapestry he’s spun just to see how he’s managed the threads is irresistible.

“Not two simultaneous types,” he corrects automatically “Sequential ones, one centering around one of his obsessions, and the second, the other. He had to master the one before he could proceed to the next. As the Ripper... The aesthetic visions were about destroying his old self. His young, base, abused and ugly self. Maybe he chose people who offended or insulted him, and took their useful bits. The bits, the vital organs - those that could be transplanted into someone else, after death, and give someone else new life. He’d take the organs and eat them to fuel his new life - the one he'd have when he felt he was ready, when he’d evolved enough after erasing - killing - all of his old ties with the traditional family unit and making way for a new version. Him, and Miriam/Mischa and Hannibal. He saw the news, and that Hannibal was on the case, and overheard someone talking about the cannibalism theory, and Hobbs wanting to honour the victim, and thought that it was a sign. And he left the message for Hannibal, in Cassie Boyle: 'They’re idiots, they don’t see the way we do.’"

“What about the photo of Lass in the window?" Jimmy asks. "The one that brought the St. Louis P.D. in to identify Dolarhyde's location?"

“Hannibal’s been in to see Dolarhyde twice in the last two weeks, as we were setting up the sting," Alana explains. "And says she was obviously and chronically drugged out of her gourd. Chances are, though, she had at least a few moments of clarity in between doses now and again, and took advantage the opportunity to pose for the shot when Dolarhyde was out, just in case someone did look up and see her and take a cell shot that would get her spotted on some public porn site. Hannibal says it’s highly, highly probable. Even without any moments of clarity, with her background in forensics, law enforcement, criminology and psychology, she’s got to have instincts when it comes to surviving worst-case scenarios that verge on autonomic - including the ability to transcend conscious awareness as necessary. He’s guessing that, that being the case.. Dolarhyde probably thwacked her on the head from behind when he took her, knocking her out and carrying her away. There’s no other way he would have ever gotten past her, and there are a couple of spots, even in his neighbourhood, where he could have pulled it off without being spotted - one of them being Hannibal’s own fenced back parking lot reserved for his patients. If she’d swung in and met Dolarhyde coming out of the private entrance he reserves for them as well, he could have whacked her, chucked her right back in her own car, and taken off without anyone ever knowing. Hannibal

never would have noticed if he wasn't specifically looking out; his entire office area is soundproofed. His kind of jumpy patients don't react well if they hear cars backfiring mid-confidence."

Evil genius, asshole or no, Will is reluctantly impressed, again, at Hannibal's own instincts when it comes to covering his contingencies. The man certainly hadn't - hasn't - survived as long as he had, or has, because of any native inability to account detail.

"So," Jimmy says. "Relevant factors: the metaphorical death of the tortured boy, the creation of pretty things - not original ones, but imitations of other artists' work, in homage to aesthetic forms that the world had already accepted as valuable… He was undoubtedly in a lot of pain a lot of the time as a child, which is why he'd vivisect his victims -sculpting his own improved, adult body through the proxy bodies as he simultaneously worked to give himself the overdeveloped muscles of the adult male again, and as for eating the removed organs…"

"Organs are considered offal, but are also the most valuable portions of the body in terms of nutrients, and represent life besides. They'd be the perfect food in his mind to help him transform from offal himself into something truly important and irreplaceable, never mind the significance of their use in life-saving transplants." Brian nods.

"And he always killed adults," Bev finishes."Never children, not openly anyway. Probably not at all. Children are still forming, physically. Unfinished. Not good material for any kind of final judgmental stateme…"

"SHH!" someone says loudly. They all jerk and turn. Dolarhyde, it seems, has finally figured out the niceties of the tea ball.

"Here you are," he says awkwardly. "I'm sorry it took so long. I usually just drink coffee.'

"Quite alright. We're in no rush, are we? Why don't you clear that chair, and sit with me a bit. You still have a lot of questions, I know, I could tell the last time we talked, and maybe we should take this chance to clear them up."

Dolarhyde hesitates.

"I do," he says finally. "But they're a bit personal, Dr. Lecter, and I don't know if you'd think they were rude or not."

"Try me," Lecter encourages. "I won't be upset if they are, I promise, as you've demonstrated that you have taken my old-world obsession with manners into account." It's playful, teasing. Light. "Never mind that after all you've done for me, personally, my sensibilities are likely more inclined to answer the personal."

'Are you sure?'

'Of course."

“Um. Alright. Um. Would you tell me a bit about what happened then? How you and Mischa got separated in the first place?’

It is timid and diffident. There is a stretched silence.

“Dr. Lecter?” Dolarhyde says uncertainly. “I’m sorry, you don’t have to…”

“It’s alright, Francis. I knew that was likely your question even as I offered to answer.”

“I don’t…”

“It’s alright,” Lecter says again. “I just… I’ve never really talked about it before. To anyone. All things considered though… I think you, perhaps, are the one person who could understand. No.” Will can almost see him hold up his hand. “Just… Let me start. It’ll be easier, once I get started.”

“I won’t interrupt, I promise.”

“Thank you.”

There is the sound of a deep, inhaled breath. Then...

“As I have told you, I was born in Lithuania.” Lecter’s voice is remote. Distant. Detached. “I lived there with my family. My mother and father… And Mischa. The year I turned ten and she was four was the most brutal winter in living memory. The post World War Two hostilities extended for decades in my country; once the Nazis were dispensed of, the Soviet Republic resumed its quite successful focused attempts at occupation, and the hostilities between their forces and those of the Lithuanian freedom fighters were chronically vicious, to say the least. That winter, though... Formal hostilities were informally suspended. There were only two enemies: cold and hunger. We Lecters were as affected as everyone else, but as we were minor nobility - my father was, in fact, a count - we, with our established holdings and resources, were still better off than most. That wasn’t saying a great deal after the point, but it still made us constant targets for guerrillas, dissidents, military deserters from both sides and desperate civilians alike. They would all attack our home - it was more of a small castle - in groups, again and again, looking for everything they could find in the name of comfort. Food, items to sell, women… Eventually, we were forced to leave. We packed what we could, and made our way to a safehouse - a small hunting lodge, deep in the forests. A group, inevitably, tracked us there, hoping to steal whatever we’d managed to bring with us. They found us. They killed my mother and father. They didn’t kill me and Mischa though. As were both quite unreasonably beautiful children... They had other plans for us.”

There is a deep silence as that processes.

“Jesus,” Brian whispers numbly. “Oh my *Jesus.* Oh my God. Oh my *God.*”

“They chained us together in the cellars.” Lecter’s voice continues. “They kept us there for weeks while they decided what to do with us. Who to sell us to. There were options. Any number of them, and they could afford to wait on the best. Until they couldn’t. Then they came one last time, and took Mischa. I begged them to take me instead. They said not to

worry, my day was coming. She looked over her shoulder as they dragged her away. "Anniba," she said. "No. I want Anniba." They laughed, and petted her, and said she'd see me soon. Told her to blow me a kiss. She did. One of them… He looked back over his shoulder too, and winked at me, and licked his lips. I never saw her again."

Alana's face is wet. Bella's hand is over her mouth, her face angled so her eyes are shadowed.

"They never came back," the faceless, accented voice says. "Eventually, I grew thin enough to slip out of the chain that held me. To slip between the bars of the cage they kept me in. I went upstairs. There was blood everywhere, mutilated bodies everywhere. The biters bit. But Mischa wasn't there. Her buyers hadn't known I was there too, I know, or they would have come for me. I suppose my original captors hadn't had enough time to mention me. Or maybe they enjoyed the thought of me starving to death, since they had to know they would never survive the attack on them, and didn't want the ones who killed them to profit off of me . But I survived. Not just that winter, but till I was thirteen, when my father's relatives finally found me, and took me in. Yes. Yes, I survived." The sour, sardonic undertones there are as subtly, perfectly and exquisitely presented as any dish ever prepared in the faceless speaker's kitchen. "I was… Very, very good at surviving."

Jimmy looks like he is about to be sick, not with sympathy but with pure, helpless rage. Brian's lips are curled back now, corpse-white fingers gripping the arms of his seat and teeth bared. Will can hear them grinding compulsively from where he sits, can taste the blood swimming in his mouth. The blood in the mouths of every person in the room, mingling as bitter, black wine for his empathic delectation. He closes his eyes, inhaling the scent of Beverly's hair, listening for the shower. Even in her pain, she turns, taking his face in her hands and kissing him savagely, trying, he knows to refocus herself as much as him. The salt of her tears mingles with the blood, and the phantom knife twisting in his guts.

"And now she's here." Dolarhyde is saying. He sounds insufferably pleased and triumphant. "And you're together again! Like in a fairy tale!"

A primal low snarl rises simultaneously from Jimmy and Brian's throats at that, echoed by every man in the room. The women… The women have gone beyond the ability. As women do, Will thinks… Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Bella's hand remove from her lips. Her profile is elegant, gracious and brutally expressionless - the expression of a dying woman with the ice-cold awareness that she has nothing to lose. In that moment… Will knows that Phyllis 'Bella' Crawford would trade in every second left to her, including the opportunity to say goodbye to her beloved husband, for the personal privilege of taking Francis Dolarhyde with her. She'd trade it in just for the privilege of *witnessing* it.

The Chesapeake Ripper always killed in sounders of three. Cassie Boyle was his first victim of his last public cycle. The second and third though.. Those are ever going to be Mischa Lecter, raised, desecrated and murdered again before the eyes of her long-tortured brother, and that brother himself, vivisected and on public display for all to see.

Not a victim, though. No. A willing *sacrifice*. Even when laying the Ripper to rest, Lecter can't leave anything undone. If it is going to be finished, he is going to finish it properly, according to pattern. It is Hannibal the Cannibal's finest hour, and the only way he could go

out, flayed, martyred and displayed on his own table-turned-altar. And all the world, not just Baltimore's high society, is invited to dinner to share in the sacrament of his bloody remains, his guests appropriately dumbstruck as before their eyes, he unwraps the rotted leaves, peels back the baked, aged clay, lays out the *piece de resistance* - his own raw and bleeding heart.

Jack Crawford isn't going to get a strip torn out of him for taking off without informing his wife where he was going, Will thinks. Not if he comes home with a dead Dolarhyde. If he pulls that one off, he's going to get the blowjob of his life. Every day, for the rest of that wife's life.

"Do you wish you'd gotten to hurt them?" Dolarhyde is asking.

A small, tired, quintessentially bitter snort emerges from Hannibal Lecter's wired connection at that - half sob, half laugh. Will is supremely disconcerted. Consummate actor or no…

His empathic sense is telling him that the emotions behind that non-verbal statement, at least, are *real.*

"It's alright, I shouldn't…"

"Yes," Hannibal Lecter says, cutting him off. "Yes, Francis. I do. I even imagined for awhile that…" He exhales again. "The bodies… Some were recognizable. Most… Were not. By the time I emerged from the cellars, you see, the predators had gotten to them. I wasn't… I recognized a few, but the rest… I wasn't sure. I convinced myself that some of the original group could, conceivably have gotten away. That they might have had a traitor or two in their midst, who conspired with the buyers to eliminate those who would have claimed shares of the profits, and, as I was no longer as attractive a prospect as I might have been, or perhaps just too dangerous one; I was my father's heir after all, and our relatives would almost certainly in the future be looking for me, if not my sister… Left me to die again."

"And you went looking for them." It is not a question.

"I did. I went looking, but… I got to a point… Not for lack of conviction that they'd survived; I actually found real evidence at several points that at least two of them had… But. I stopped before I actually found them. I didn't forgive them… Never that... But I stopped looking."

"What? Why?" The blank confusion in Dolarhyde's voice is echoed in every face in the room.

"Oh, not because I was afraid. Or because I thought it would be wrong to avenge my family, but… I think you, of all people, understand this, Francis…. The things that I dreamed on doing to them all… That I think I would have felt compelled - *obliged* - to do to them, once I saw them face to face again… They would have changed me. They're the things, we both know, that *do* change you, and not always in a good way either, if they're not done up properly or for the right reasons - for vengeance, rather than toward the end of becoming new. And I was looking for Mischa too. Always… Always looking. I wanted to believe she was looking too. For me. And if I'd changed… If we'd found each other, one way or the other, she might not have been able to recognize me in my new form. Whatever it turned out

to be. And I wanted to stay her Anniba. So she'd see me as she remembered me, if we ever saw each other again."

"That's why you have a big beautiful house, like a castle, and are always cooking nice meals, and always look nice!" It sounds enlightened, and pleased with itself, and hopeful, as if he's figured out the answer to a puzzle put to him by a teacher, and is hoping for a reward. "In case she escaped and found you! It would be the way she left it, with dinner ready and you dressed up to meet her! And you became a surgeon so you could fix her if she was hurt, and a psychiatrist, later, so you could help her if she needed to talk about everything that happened to both of you!"

"Just fucking *kill* him! Just… *Do* it!" Brian bursts out: teary, loud and furious. Hannibal Lecter isn't just garnering sympathizers. He is going to come out of this with a fucking personal *army.* There isn't a single member of the FBI after today who won't defend him from this moment to the moment of his natural death. Against *anything.* God himself could appear and condemn him before the world for his sins, and the world would do nothing but spit in His face and turn their backs on Him.

Ten to one there'd be a proposal on the global table within the hour for the election of a new deity. Will has to bury his face in Beverly's hair to stifle his wildly inappropriate, unbelieving hysterical laughter. In his mind's eye, he feels Hannibal's own eyelid shiver and droop at him in an eminently smug, empathic wink.

"You would have made an excellent psychiatrist yourself, Francis, do you know that?" Lecter's voice says. "I'm sorry, This is very difficult. I don't want to think back on those times. I'd rather just look ahead now. Is that alright?'

"I'm sorry, Dr. Lecter. I shouldn't have asked." It is genuinely abashed. Subdued. "They're bad memories."

"You have nothing to apologize for. You've kept her safe for me. You kept her safe and warm, and took care of her for me. You gave her medicine, and good food, until I could get here. Till it was time for all of us to be together."

"She wasn't any trouble at all, Dr. Lecter. It's been nice having her here. She's a good girl."

"She is. She always was."

"What now?" he ventures. "Where will you take her?"

"You mean, where will *we* take her, don't you?"

"What do you mean?'

"That we're all going together, of course."

"Together?"

"Of course, Francis." It was gentle. Tender. "We're family. Right now… we're going to go to the place I've made for the three of us. A house by the sea, quiet, full of light… How does

that sound?'

Will's brow wrinkles. *A place you've made for the three…*

Okay. There's projected temporal context, and then there's...

"A castle?" Dolarhyde sounds both hopeful and dazzled.

"No. Not quite. But it's very beautiful, and is filled with beautiful things. I brought a few of my favourite things with me from my house in Baltimore. I might even have a surprise or two for you waiting too."

"You didn't have to do that."

"I'm afraid I did. You deserve it. You deserve everything I'm going to give you and more, Francis Dolarhyde, for what you've done."

An ugly bark of a laugh sounds from somewhere in the front rows of listening spectators.

"But we're not ready. I wasn't expecting you till tomorrow morning. And what about your practice in Baltimore?'

"Francis," Lecter says after a moment. "What do you think psychiatry is about, really? How would you define it?'

Dolarhyde says nothing.

"Psychiatry is the study of human pain," Hannibal Lecter says exactingly. "Of the maimed and injured soul, directed toward the end of healing - or at the very least, of demonstrating to those who come to you for help that they are not alone. That last is key, for however experienced, clinical and objective the physician may appear, the fact remains that we are able to treat our patients most effectively when we are able to relate to them. It's taken me a long, long, long time to really understand that, though. To internalize it. When my family died, you see… When I thought Mischa died… I have never wanted to face my own pain. To talk on it. I have, for the larger part… Attempted to ignore it. And it takes a lot of effort to ignore that kind of pain. Before I understood what psychiatry really is... Becoming a psychiatrist, I thought, would allow me to see and experience other people's pain to the point where I might feel justified… Because there is so very much pain in this world, Francis… In ignoring my own. I was helping people after all. What is more human than the instinct to set aside your pain to help someone else? Now… Now the pain I felt has gone away. Mischa is here. You are here. It's been a very, very long road… But it is finished, and now it's time to start over. As a family. And as I have no more pain to resolve, or commiserative related sufferance to offer up as a salve to others… I don't need my practice anymore." he considered that. "Perhaps I do. Perhaps I will, one day, furhter my understanding and be able to use all of this to take my patients and myself along new roads to recovery. But I'm not quite there yet, and in the meantime… I feel quite justified in taking a sabbatical."

"But why would you want me to come with you? I'm not…"

"There's nothing wrong with you." It is perfectly, tenderly exasperated. "You're *beautiful,* Francis. You've always *been* beautiful. The fault was never in the way you looked, but in the ways other looked *at* you. Not everyone is born with the capacity and tolerance to internalize beauty the way you do. With your ability to allow it to transform them. Transformation is painful. The more capacity you have… The more potential we have… The more painful it is, and so the more we avoid it. We strain at the seams with it, and every now and then, as we are human, we crack a little. This… No. No, don't pull away. "It's a little crack is all, that you were born with, as a physical reflection of the fact that you were born with so much potential that was not meant to be contained. If you can manage to look at yourself and understand that… that your wounds, your scars are not something to be despised, but a gift, a sign of how special you are, not anything else… Most people aren't ever able to see their own beauty, Francis. They just look at the cracks and see what they don't have. And they hate it, but really… They're hating themselves. It's very sad, and I know you've suffered greatly for the blindness and projected self-hate of others, but you've survived it. And look where you are now."

"And will Mischa wake up properly again when we get there?'

"Yes," Hannibal Lecter says. "She will. You've taken such very good care of her, Francis. Been so careful and good with her. Good to her. I think the change of scenery will be just what she needs to bring her all the way back.".

"I'm glad. I've been so worried about her. I gave her the special food, and the medicines and I wanted to call you sometimes to see if I was doing it right, but…"

"You did very well," Lecter reassures him. "You've taken wonderful care of her for me. Now. I'm going to give you my car keys, and I want you to get my car. It's half a block down; the blue sedan on the left under the big oak tree. Bring it round, alright, and I'll collect Mischa and her things, and we'll be on our way."

"You're sure I don't need any of my things?'

"I'm sure. I'm going to take care of you now. We'll send an email to your workplace later, offering your resignation. They'll understand, especially when you tell them they can keep your last paycheck."

"I'm scared."

"Why?" It is gentle again.

"I don't know."

"There's nothing to be afraid of. This isn't the end. It's the beginning. Beginnings are always a little frightening, but you're not alone. I'm beginning again too. I have no idea what will happen, but this I know. I'll be with you, every step of the way. That's the important part. Not that you're frightened, but that you know you're not alone anymore."

"And you're not upset by what I did in Baltimore? And all the other…"

He stops. Every spine in the room snaps into the upright position.

“You’re telling me that the Marlows weren’t the first ones?” Lecter asks. "After all?"

The Marlows? What... Will's eyes widen in recognition. *The Marlows? Teresa and... The couple I investigated? The couple that brought me back to Jack's attention, right before he came back to find me for the Shrike case? He's saying that Francis Dolarhyde was responsible for...*

“N- no. I tried, but they weren’t right, they…” He hesitates. “I think maybe… They were meant to help somebody else along. Not me. Someone like me, but not… Really me. They weren’t... Quite right.”

Gotcha, fucker, Bev whispers.

“Don’t be afraid. You don’t have to be afraid to tell me anything. Why do you think that I would be upset?’

“You’re a nice person. Nice people don’t… They don’t understand. They don’t see…” He trails off.

“It’s not really a question of ‘nice’, Francis. It’s a question of morality: of good and evil, and as a psychiatrist, I can tell you that morality doesn’t factor in in your instance.”

“It… Doesn’t?”’

“No. In your instance.. Your actions constituted exercises in moral neutrality because they were an intrinsic element - *the* intrinsic element - of your Becoming. You were acting to preserve and sustain your own life, in self defense, in a way, and every law in every land there is on this earth recognizes your rights, legally and morally, there. Though as it isn’t necessary now, we might want to consider more traditional methods of therapy from hereon in.”

“What do you mean?’

“You’ve been on a long journey, that you never expected, really, to end. I can’t, if I’m brutally honest, say that I approve of the methods you chose to get to this point, Francis, but when it comes down to it… I understand them. I understand you, and there’s no turning back time in any case, is there? What’s done is done, and we are always free to make different choices as we move forwards. And I don’t think that you’ll need to make the same choices that you always have anymore. *You’ve Become who you wanted to be.* Who you were always destined to be, and we can grieve for the man you were, but what’s the point really, of condemning him? He’s dead now. Death is the great leveler. All debts and sins paid. Erased. He - you - have been reborn, new and clean, through blood and pain. It’s how it works. We’re born in blood and grow from our pain, all of us. We internalize it, sculpt ourselves bit by bit from the very ashes even as we burn, and in the end… Are transformed by it into something infinitely more beautiful than we ever could have imagined when we first started out. Something greater. We do not just become part of something greater than ourselves, we ourselves become greater.”

“Do you think they all understood that? A little?”

“Is that important to you?” It is cool, clinical.

Dolarhyde, for a long moment, breathes unevenly and uncertainly.

“Let’s try this from another angle," Lecter temporizes. "Why did you choose the Marlows? They weren’t a family, to help you along the road to identifying and claiming yours. A married couple, yes, but not a mother and father.”

“They wanted to be.”

“Go on.”

“The first ones… The first ones…” Dolarhyde struggles. “It was important. Not that they were a family, but that they wanted to *be* a family. I went online. Hacked into the records fertility clinics in the Baltimore area. They were there. They wanted a baby so badly, Dr. Lecter. They’d tried… Four times. The last time… The records said it was the last attempt. They just didn’t have enough money to try again. I didn’t have any money to give them, but they didn’t… They just… I saw that they were the ones that I could help, to be a mother and father. Just like I needed help… To be born. So I’d be new.” It was a whisper.

“So you were honouring them?”

“I tried. I didn’t… I did him quick. I didn’t want to… I didn’t want him to be in pain.”

“And her? There was quite a bit of pain involved there, Francis. Was her pain part of your design?’

“Well, it hurts to have a baby, doesn’t it?” Dolarhyde says. It is matter-of-fact. “It has to.That’s just the way it is. I didn’t enjoy it, but it hurts women to have babies. And I had to put myself as the baby inside her, too, before I could be born.”

“And what about Cassie Boyle?” Alana asks. Everyone else is far too outraged at that last to speak. “What role did she play in all this, Will?’

“He took her lungs,” Will says, detached. He is almost hysterical in revulsion and admiration both at Lecter’s pure, sick diabolical genius. At how he can use anyone, anything to rationalize anything, even after the fact. He might actually be sorry for Dolarhyde, save for, of course, that he’d been onside at the relevant crime scene, and had felt…. *Experienced...* Exactly how, and how much, Teresa Marlow had suffered, and, despite his protestations to the contrary, how much Dolarhyde *had* enjoyed himself. “The Ripper mounted her, on both the deer and in the psychosexual sense, and took her lungs, while she was still alive. So he could inhale her last breath from her live lungs, as his own first breath. He saw that Dr. Lecter was on the Shrike case with me, and incorporated the style of his murders into the Ripper’s final statement to be sure he’d take note. To show him that it was a live birth, and he was waiting for his call.”

“I don’t get it,” Brian says, puzzled. “He just doesn’t seem that smart. Aware. The Ripper... The Ripper was brilliant. Everyone, every analysis agrees on that much. He seems almost impaired.'

“He’s regressed,” Alana says. "He’s talking as a child, projecting as a child right now, because in his mind now, he is a child. The man he was… The Ripper… Was brilliant, as you said. Intense. Shy and withdrawn, but Hannibal says that his conversations with him were indicative of, as is the case with many psychopaths, true intellectual genius. He’s given way though. He’s dead. Now… His psyche is starting over, on all levels. The genius is still there, but it’s gone latent for the moment, and will start to re-emerge as Dolarhyde begins to age and grow out of the stage he’s assigned himself now.”

“Jesus,” Jimmy mutters. “That blowhard Chilton over the BSHCI is going to get a lifetime of wank material out of this one, isn’t he?

“He probably would, yeah,” Bev says. “But Dolarhyde won’t end up at BSHCI. He’s killed across multiple states as the Ripper, and if he actually did kill people in Japan while he was enlisted, and they can track down even one of his victims, the government and the military’s going to be throwing him in a hole a lot deeper than the good state of Maryland can provide him.”

“Well, there you are, then.” Lecter's voice is very firm. “You honoured them all in your choice of them. They all, even the ones who weren’t quite right, helped you reach your potential, to outgrow that which is inside you, and there’s no need to regret anything you’ve done, Francis, because I’m quite certain that if they’d understood… The Marlows especially… Well. Each and every one of them is part of who you are now. All of them are your parents in a way, and what good parent *wouldn’t* willingly die for their child?”

“You really do understand.” It is wondering. “Don’t you?”

“I do. I’ve been there too, you see? I just... Chose another route, a route dictated by my own context, and the circumstances of my own pain. I can teach them to you, if you like. Unless of course…’

He pauses.

“Unless... What?”

“Do you *want* to do those things again, Francis?’

“I don’t know. It’s still new.”

“We’ll take it one moment, one hour, one day at a time then. It won’t be easy. But I have confidence in you. If you feel you require forgiveness… Or should… I forgive you. Here. Up you get now. We’ve got a long ride ahead of us, and I’d like to get a good start before we stop for the night. Here are my keys. The keys to your future. All you have to do is walk out that door and bring the car around, and we’ll get started.”

“Will you walk with me?’

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

“I should collect Mischa’s things.”

“She’s still asleep. We’ll only be gone a minute.”

“Just to the door. I’ll be watching. I’ll watch you take those first steps.”

“Fuck.” Not-a-Supermarket Manager’s voice resounds. “He had him, he had…”

“Shut *up!* ” Not-Librarian’s voice isn’t just a harsh slap, but a roundhouse uppercut.

“Here. Let’s straighten you up a bit. Tuck in your shirt, that’s it. Straighten your collar.” It is supremely indulgent.

“Check him for weapons,” Jimmy mutters tensely. “Come on, come…”

“There. Bit of a comb… First thing we'll do is get you a haircut. Wonderful.”

“Jesus Christ, he’s good,” Brian mumbles. “I want to be him when I grow u…”

And the door finally opens. Dolarhyde puts one foot on the first step… And freezes.

“Francis?” Hannibal says from behind him. “What is it?” And he steps up beside him, just as a car careens down the street toward them, screeches up and skids to a halt. A small figure slips out, camera flashing.

“Oh my fucking God,” Beverly says incredulously. "Are you fucking *kidding* me? Is that Freddie fucking *Lounds?* How? *How?”*

In that split second, Dolarhyde seems to grow - and a thin scream of fury sounds as he seizes the startled Hannibal Lecter by the arm, flips him and literally throws him down the steps, landing on him as he tears his shirt open. Another thin scream of fury escapes as the wire is revealed. A near-simultaneous howl of pain escapes Lecter as a sickening double crack sounds, Dolarhyde’s right knee coming down to snap the right arm as the huge man yanks and dislocates the left. A swarm of black-clad men and women spring out from behind hedge, cars, the rooftops.,, Will surges to his feet, knocking Beverly half off hers, his heart in his mouth, as…

“He’s got a fucking *knife?* No, no, no, n…”

And Hannibal bucks hard, once: smoothly, flexing and throwing him off balance, twisting his torso and slipping his left arm out to grab at the knife. Dolarhyde rears back and comes down on him again, but Hannibal is blocking and grabbing, somehow, and is knocking the blade aside with his uninjured shoulder as his head snaps forward and sideways in an odd sinuous movement.

For a timeless eternity, no one breathes, on screen or off, as they attempt to decipher the obscured angle.

Then...

Blood literally sprays everywhere, thick as paint. Dolarhyde's body slumps heavily, and falls aside. Hannibal rolls out from under him, painfully. Staggering, he rises, his right arm twisted at a double angle. Will can see white bone protruding, and the knife half-buried in the opposing bicep. He is soaked in gore, hair drenched, his eyes burning… In the light of sunset, the merlot shines red as blood.

And he turns his head and spits deliberately, Francis Dolarhyde's torn throat falling with a sodden thump on the lake of crimson surrounding him.

Jack picks his way over carefully, and regards the swaying man before him, and the corpse, and reaches into his pocket, holding out his hand.

"Breath mint?" he offers.

"Thank you, Jack," Hannibal Lecter says."You're so kind. Would you mind terribly? I wouldn't want to sog up the pack.'

"Not at all." Jack unwraps the roll, popping three and depositing them in Hannibal's mouth. "I have to say, Dr. Lecter, red is a truly excellent colour on you. Right this way; the paramedics are waiting."

"I'll manage," Hannibal reassures him. "You go on up, now. She'll want a familiar and comforting face, and I'm not exactly a reassuring sight. Mind your step on the stairs; they're very steep."

Jack promptly heads in and up. Hannibal is immediately swarmed by paramedics, even as Freddie Lounds is swarmed by men in black. Opposite, the screen, the not-librarian is on the phone.

"Find the leak," she orders. "No. I do not fucking care. I want to know how that bitch got wind of this operation, and I want it within the hour, or you're fired. All of you. She's based out of fucking Baltimore, and it's a four hour flight from Maryland to St. Louis, so it had to be an inside job."

"Alana," Will says, his mind working at top deductive speed despite its shock. "Alana, where's the iPod Hannibal put in the gift basket?'

"What?'

"The iPod. The one in the basket. The one that was delivered by courier, not Lecter in person?'

Bev swears. Alana stares at him... And reaches for her purse.

"Have you been carrying it all this time?" he asks as he peers in.

“I was with Jack when he got the call. We were at the drive-through getting coffee. I was flipping through the playlist.”

“She must have planted it when the courier left it at the nurse’s station. With extra fucking *batteries*. She wouldn’t have gotten anything though, not till you left, because I never turned it on.”

“Gimme.” Bev digs in her pocket, hauling out one of her ubiquitous ziplock bags. Alana shakes the device from the purse. Bev hurries toward the infuriated librarian.

“You okay, Mrs. Crawford?’ Jimmy asks, concerned. Bella is still staring, shocked, at the screen.

“I could use a drink,” she says after a moment. “And a cigarette. Stage four lung cancer, I’ve got nothing left to lose, and even watching that was quite possibly the most satisfying experience of my life."

“I could use a cold shower myself,” Brian agreed. “I want a copy of the money shot framed for the lab.”

Will rubs his head as he reseats himself, the celebration raging around him. Alana pulls up a chair and rubs his shoulder.

“He’s fine,” she reassures him. “They’ll have him in surgery before the hour’s out. Might have to hire a sous chef and someone to iron his pocket squares for a few weeks, but he’ll be good as new in no time.”

“It’s all on the same tape as Dolarhyde’s admission that he’s the Ripper. His personal story. It’s evidence.”

“He’s a strong man,” she says gently. ‘We’ll protect him, Will. And it won’t necessarily…”

She stops.

“The money shot is already up on Tattlecrime,” he says. “You know it is. As soon as she took it, Lounds probably rerouted it straight to the site by her phone and pressed ‘publish’. And he’s a civilian. There’s no way around it. The story is going to have to go public. All of it, for his own protection.”

“She’ll pay for the privilege of leaking it,” the not-librarian says grimly as she approaches. “Trust me on that one. Do you still have the batteries that came with the iPod in your hospital room, Mr. Graham?”

“Yeah. They’ve probably got the fingerprints of everybody who’s come in to visit me though “

“We’ll see.” She squeezes his shoulder, and strides off. Will’s pocket rings. He digs it out. Alana leans over.

“It's him!” she stands and bellows. “SHUT UP! Go on, Will,” she urges. He sighs.

“Hello, Dr. Lecter,” he says.

“Put it on speaker!” someone calls.

“Hello, Will.” The sudden projected voice is exhausted and thick. “I'm so sorry to bother you. I'm trying to reach Alana, but her phone is dead, and I knew she would be with you.”

“No worries. Are you okay?’ He winces. “Sorry. That’s a stupid question.”

“Appreciated, nonetheless. I am being wheeled into surgery soon. In the meantime… This hospital dispenses truly excellent painkillers.”

Will snorts with laughter, in spite of himself.

“Just a quick question,” he says. “For the record. Did you put an iPod in the gift basket you sent me?"

““‘A… What? No, of course not. You are suffering from encephalitis. The last thing you need is the localized directed noise to aggravate your condition. Why do you …” There is a pause. “Ah. That would explain Miss Lounds, then.”

“Don’t you worry about her, Doc,” Bev says firmly. “Bitch is going *down.* ”

“Miss Katz? Is that you?”

“Yeah. I know doctors make lousy patients, but you let us worry about everything from hereon in. Also, can I wheedle your recipe for lemon tarts out of you? Those were the best things I have ever tasted in my life.’

“Thank you.” It is groggier by the second. “And no. You cannot. You’re just going to have to ask Mr. Zeller and Mr. Price for their analysis of the ingredients, and experiment. You’re a forensic specialist; it shouldn’t be that hard.”

“I wouldn’t do that. And I’m entitled to it directly now anyway.”

“Are you? How is that?”

“Because it’s obviously a secret family recipe, and you’re family,” she says. “We’re your family. Everybody in this room. You’re ours now, Hannibal Lecter: one of us. Forever and ever, amen.”

A huge roar of approval sounds at that.

“Ah,” Lecter says. “I shall have to get a larger dining table then. And as my right arm is temporarily out of commission, and my left not much better, the official celebration will have to wait."

“Potluck. It’s a thing. Will can host at his place. He’s got that big back-forty, and we’ll just bring in picnic tables and a few barbecues.”

“That will not be necessary. We will combine it with my house-warming party.”

“Huh?’

“I am moving,” Lecter says. “Or will be. If you know any good real estate agents, I would appreciate the reference.”

“I’ll ask around. Go on now. Go take your nap.”

“I will. Alana?’

“I’m right here, Hannibal,” Alana says. “What is it?’

“Will you call Bedelia, please, and tell her what has happened? She will be quite perturbed with me if she hears of everything on the news first."

“Of course,” Alana reassures him. “I’ll go as soon as I drop Will and Bella back at the hospital.”

“Katz, Price and Zeller,” the not-librarian calls. “Crawford’s called in; he wants the three of you on a plane ASAP and onsite. We can’t risk anything going wrong on this one.”

“Shit,” Bev says. “Well no, not shit: yay, but... *Shit.* I’m sorry, Will.”

“Go.” He pats her ass. “If you see Freddie Lounds, tell her I wish her the very very best in her new career. Whatever that may be.”

She kisses him again and jogs off, twisting her way through the crowd. Bella reaches out and takes his hand.

“Thank you,” she says.

“For what?”

“For being you? As you are? It's good to have resolution. Jack’s never forgiven himself for sending Miriam in. I’m glad…” Her mouth twists a little. “I’m glad it’s resolved, before... “

He looks at her.

“Bella,” he says.

“Yes?’

“Are there any other unresolved cases that have bothered him over the years? That it would offer you peace to see resolved again, before…”

She eyes him.

“I’m a pretty good fisherman,” Will says. “Is all. And now that my head’s cleared… I’m going to need to test things out, to see how much was me, and how much was the encephalitis.”

“I’ll think about it,” she says. “And let you know. Excuse me a moment, while I... ”

She gestures. Up at the front, someone is rewinding the displayed last shot to the point where Dolarhyde knocks Lecter down the steps. A tidal wave of raucous cheers rises at the revisited brutal moment.

“Beer,” she says. “Cigarettes.”

“Dry underwear,” an agent near her agrees. “For every person here, and if anyone here does say they don’t need them, one way or the other, we’ve got a nice polygraph machine right down the hall with their names on it.”

And on that note, the party *really* gets started.

Back At The Hospital

Quite, Quite Some Time Later

Will lies in the pristine white bed in his hospital room, awash in blessed, cursed silence. Despite his best efforts to avoid the obvious probable truth now, his post-event analysis is leading him to the one definite, inevitable conclusion.

It’s not enough, he thinks stubbornly. Desperately. *I need more. I need confirmation. I can’t just…*

He throws down his phone, held loosely in his hand, and palms his eyes.

It could all be a coincidence. Crossed time-lines and out-of- time references aside… He runs on themes *. Patterns. He washes his words like he washes his place settings, till they’re shining and ready to serve up the metaphors he makes of us all in the end. Hearts, brains, kidneys, lungs, livers… Basic staples that all sustain him, but that he can prepare a thousand different ways, depending on the guest before him. And sitting opposite him.*

His pragmatic side scoffs at his desperate rationalizing, not terribly politely either. Will shoves it aside. It shoves right back.

I don’t know *what happened, alright?* he tells it. *I. Don’t.* Know. *Maybe I’m still unconscious, still in a coma, and this is my psyche’s way of trying to find a way out of everything that happened, to rewrite it all. To rewrite myself, and him, and bring Beverly back, and to reroute everything that’s happened from the beginning., incorporating particularly crucial elements and catchphrases from our experiences that stuck especially hard. It makes a lot more sense than fucking* time travel, that’s *for damned sure. And I haven’t even really even stopped to think about how weird this all is, have I? I’ve just… Accepted it for what it appears to be, and of all people, of* all *people, I know better than to do that when Hannibal Lecter is involved.*

He removes his hands from his face, and with an abrupt movement, throws the blanket back and pads to the bathroom, staring at himself in the mirror. His eyes look enormous in his clean-shaven face, his hair weirdly contained in its neat, eminently stylish clipped tousle… He pulls his shirt up and examines his unscarred belly. Prods a bit. Not so much as a gas bubble stirs to trouble him. Something small and black catches his eye, he bends to pick it up. It is a bobby pin, escaped from Beverly's hair, a single dark strand caught. He tugs at it gently. Leans against the sink hip first and closes his eyes.

Miriam Lass. Mischa Lecter. All wistful elements come together, searching for form and cohesion. Except he never mentioned a sister. We talked about his family in our first session, but he never mentioned any siblings.

Mischa. Derivative of Michael. Champion and Defender of the light. In battle.

I am definitely, definitely *in a coma. That's just sloppy psychiatry, Dr. Graham.*

On the other hand… If I am… What's the harm in going back to sleep, till I wake up, and just… seeing what happens next?

Never mind that he never, never, never would have let the people who hurt his family like that go. He would have hunted them to the ends of the earth, and salted, scoured, burned and

Will stills.

There were only two enemies that winter: cold and hunger.

They kept us there for weeks while they decided what to do with us. Who to sell us to. There were options. Any number of them, and they could afford to wait on the best

(Until they couldn't)

Then they came one last time, and took Mischa. I begged them to take me instead. They said not to worry, my day was coming. She looked over her shoulder as they dragged her away. "Anniba," she said. "No. I want Anniba." They laughed, and petted her, and said she'd see me soon. Told her to blow me a kiss. She did. One of them… He looked back over his shoulder too, and winked at me, and

(licked his lips)

I never saw her again.

Will squeezes his eyes shut in absolute, sickened understanding

They ate her, they ate *her, and made him eat her too; he was ten, only ten, he wouldn't have realized till after, just that they brought him food; it wouldn't have been something he could even have imagined, till*

He caught up with them. He caught up with them, and they told him the truth. They laughed with it. They would have known they were dead. They would have taunted him with it, to the last. At the last.

Everyone has to start somewhere. Every monster has a first victim. A first meal. Food for the journey.

She's always been with him. He never saw her again. And she's always been with him.

Will slides down, huddled between the shower and the toilet, and buries his face in his hands.

It could be a lie. A distraction. The evidence at his scenes… You'll always find something that points to, and ultimately leads away from, Hannibal Lecter.

But time is a circle, come round. That which leads away, then… Must always come back.

He pushes himself up blindly, and returns to the bed, sitting on the edge. Picks up the phone. There is a notification. He thumbs the screen.

BK: **HOLY *G_D* THIS PLACE IS *UNREAL* , NM THE FULL ARRAY OF #HUNGRYMANREDDIMEALS. I AM NEVER EATING MEAT AGAIN EXCEPT YOURS, OF COURSE. GO FISHING SOON BECAUSE YOU'LL BE SPRUNG BY THE TIME I GET BACK AND YOU OWE ME DINNER BUT NO STEAK-AND-ASSOCIATED FOR ME. JUST. HOLY. G_D. *NO* . Also, Z. says that Lecter is obvs hot fr yr ass. Told you so, and it's AOK w/ me. NM the cookies and chocolates, I wd have abso. *NP* w. tarting it up on the mutual shared plate, and there's the sad and unfortunate loss of his primary hand fr foreseeable future b-sides. Poor Thing. We Owe Him Our Gratitude!**

Despite his anxiety (and the unfortunate visual) Will guffaws. Loudly, and types.

WG: **I'll be sure to send him a gift basket, then. F.Y.I., I don't share my desserts, Agent Katz.**

BK: **We could share you. :)**

WG: **Go analyze fibrous materials, woman. Uncle Sam Wants YOU!**

BK: **Uncle Sam's had me, every way there is. He's got me on contract there, even. TTYL!**

Will sets the phone aside, and lies back, throwing his arm over his eyes. Gets up, goes to the window and closes the curtains, and to the door, closing it as well. Returns to his bed and arranges himself, throwing his arm over his eyes again, and slowly, slowly releasing the air from his lungs.

The pendulum swings.

He stands in line with them. He walks among them. He loiters, strolls, picking his fastidious way through the grubby and distasteful landscape of the eternal swarming, moldering cafeteria, keeping an eye out for those few who shine. As for those who do not - those without the redeeming however nascent, virtue of aestheticism: those who simply grunt at him, and around him...

He remains unaffected by them. Indifferent to them. Their natural crudity and vulgarity displeases him, but on the whole, he is able to ignore them. They don't - can't - touch him, don't in fact, register on his radar at all.

Unless and until of course, and in inevitable accordance with their unfortunate natures again…

They do.

That being said… All being said, God, perhaps, the Other muses, had the right of it there at least, when He said that it is not good for a man to be alone. Even a broken clock is right twice a day, and as much as the distasteful thought pains him… The Other, for all that he is the Other.. Is, as he was conceived and born of man, also a man. Hannibal Lecter is not, after all, a disguise. Hannibal Lecter exists, *and not just as a host. Like the traditional theological interpretation of Christ, he is fully human,* and *fully Other. It's all a bit annoying, really, never mind embarrassing, and the Other…* Hannibal… *becomes impatient when he thinks about it too long. There is, when it comes down to it... No point in analyzing on something that Is. The fact that it* is *Is what is important. All that's important.*

It is not about good, anyway, any more than it is of evil. It is about what the Other-known-as-Hannibal Lecter desires. What pleases him. Good and evil are by nature subjective constructs, and from Hannibal's point of view, he is the subject, and object of all. He's got it all covered, with that really quite remarkable collection of suits (human and not) either way. And from his not-humble perspective as subject and object, and adjective and adverb, and whatever grammatical construct pleases you (he'll concede you that, if only because they're all irrelevant anyway, unless Hannibal decides they are), that which pleases him is Good.

As he kneels amid the carnage, Abigail Hobbs' life literally in his hands, Hannibal Lecter regards the man beside him; this man who doesn't just shine, but illuminates. He doesn't look so much dazed as he does debauched. What would it be like, Hannibal muses, to do the job there properly? To act, in the end, not as a self-aggrandizing mirror, but a reflective barrier that reverses the man's tendency to illuminate back toward himself, leaving him to meet himself *in his own eyes? Would it destroy him? Help him Become his own version of anOther? Or would it blind him, cutting him off from that which makes him so quintessentially unique? Experiment upon potential experiment upon potential experiment… He will, Hannibal decides, find a way to perform them all. Some will be simpler matters than others. All… All will be interesting. And if, in the end, it comes to nothing… He will have lost nothing. He will simply savour the memories with a particularly fine wine, and then, as he always does…*

Clear the table, wash the dishes, tidy up as efficiently and effectively as was his wont, and start over fresh the next day.

Will holds his quiet phone loosely in his hand, staring unseeingly at his own reflection in the blank screen. His head doesn't hurt at all, and every thought seems painfully sharp and clear. He thumbs the phone on, scrolling through to the text app. The thumb hovers indecisively. He rubs his temple with his fingertips.

There was one once. She didn't define him, but her ending allowed him the opportunity to refine himself. To Become, not that which he wasn't, but that which he was destined to Become.

He loved her first, purely, completely and absolutely. He still does. He was angry, at first, when he did *start to Become, and he realized that she'd actually held him back. Made him a little more inclined to be actually human.*

In the end, though, he forgave her because of the gift her death offered him. That freed him. The pain and suffering evoked by her death, and the circumstances surrounding it, were necessary. He suffered the pain that had refined him as a result of loving her. Therefore… Love was necessary and, remembering that, always remembering that, as he remembers her… He does not reject its value, or disdain the thought of partaking should it come his way again. Ironic and impossible as the experts might sound it…

The Other within Hannibal Lecter was born of love. Does love. Or rather, is capable of loving. He simply hasn't, again, since Mischa. Hannibal Lecter is, in spite of himself, a bit of an incurable romantic. It comes with the penchant for the Aesthetic. The paintings he had created of his victims had been imitations after all; the brushstrokes influenced by other, lesser artists. The results had, therefore and inevitably been flawed, though his contribution had, of course, been technically perfect, but the points where technique met imago *had always been compromised. His love for Mischa, and her love for him, on the other hand, had been pure, perfect and reciprocated. Uninfluenced, at their young ages by false ideals or projections. In order to love that perfectly, that purely, again, to turn back time and meet himself - and her - he would have to go back in time, to before the teacup had ever been dropped, much less shattered, much less reformed, before the brushes had ever been dipped in the colours, or canvas. To a point which would allow him to unravel, if not erase, all that had happened around him since, and to begin from the beginning again. What kind of experiment would* that *be, he wonders, to step* into *the experiment? To become part of it, affected by it himself… And to see what happened then?*

(You would deny me my life.)

(Not your life.)

(My freedom, then. You'd take that from me. Confine me to a basement cell. Do you believe you could change me the way I've changed you?)

(I already have.)

He types in Hannibal's number, taps the emoji icon, and scrolls through three screens before he finds what he is looking for.

(I forgive you, Will. Will you forgive me?)

He hasn't done anything that needs forgiving yet, Will rationalizes. *Not here. Not… To me. Not if I'm wrong, not if it's just...*

He cuts the now obviously self-deceiving, futile train of thought off ruthlessly, as quickly and neatly as a linoleum knife across a healed white scar on a delicate white throat. He lifts his shirt. Trails his fingers over the unscarred surface of his belly. The walls around him are white and pristine. His head, for the first time he can remember, is completely clear and cool. Even after the time in the hospital, when he was nominally cured of the encephalitis the first time, the aftereffects of the then-far-more-entrenched illness lingered.

Will Graham selects the tiny, steaming teacup. It appears obligingly in the message box. The cursor beside it blinks patiently. He gnaws at his lip, and tastes blood. He leaves off immediately, reaching for a tissue to blot it, rather than swabbing it with his tongue.

He'll still be in recovery, he knows. Probably, given the extent of the injuries, still in surgery. The chances that he'll actually be awake and cognizant enough to answer are…

Hello, Hannibal. He types swiftly, and, before he can stop himself, refusing absolutely to even acknowledge, much less define, the twisted lumps in stomach and throat and heart all, presses SEND.

He waits a full five minutes before he reaches out to set the phone aside. No sooner has he withdrawn his hand…

His fingers shake violently as he picks up the chiming device.

Hello Will, the message reads. Two tiny perfect tea cups follow the words, then two more words themselves.

Welcome back.

Chapter End Notes

Please Note: in an interview with Bryan Fuller on the subject of the murders of the Marlows (S1 ep 1) he confirmed that he had always imagined Dolarhyde as their killer. That bit, therefore, is officially canon. I included the bit on the fertility clinic myself in order to fit my interpretation of D's psychopathy.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

It's... Been a long year?

But we're back!

Day Ten

It takes less than twelve hours after the events in St. Louis go down for all of the gory details pertaining to the capture and death of the Chesapeake Ripper, *a.k.a* Francis Dolarhyde, to come out, and for the story to become *the* talking point of the virtual global community. The F.B.I., considering that the Ripper is dead, that his conviction cannot, therefore, be compromised, and spurred on by the release of the (admittedly quite spectacular: rumours are out already that it's going to be nominated for a goddamn *Pulitzer*, it's that good) associated money shot from Freddie Lounds' website, had actually held a formal press conference less than three hours after the climactic moment. Said press conference had included *all* of the actual details, including those pertaining to the late Mischa Lecter… Permission to release those had been reportedly offered with Lecter's full and martyred blessing in the name of the Greater Good even as he was wheeled into surgery.

The results, from Will Graham's perspective, are as entirely annoying as they are predictable. Hannibal fucking Lecter is now up for the position, if not of God (quite yet, anyway; Will estimates that the man in question is timing his modest and humble acceptance of the nomination there in tandem with his triumphant physical exit from the hospital), as fucking Captain *fucking* Lithuania-America.

Will is, unsurprisingly and again, quite predictably, feeling a bit bitter about it all. He sits cross-legged on his freshly made hospital bed, the remains of his dubious breakfast tray before him, and stares at the words and images on the screen of his phone - **Hello Will, *tea cup-tea-cup,* Welcome back** - for a long impossible moment before, abruptly and without responding, powering off and stuffing the device in his desk drawer. When he turns it back on again several hours later, there is nothing waiting.

He isn't… Quite... Disappointed. As more time passes though, and he processes the active implications of the message and those tea cups, Will Graham's fury grows steadily. Not that he is being ignored - which he isn't, he knows; however stoic Lecter is, he is undoubtedly maintaining his current dignity by sleeping through the *in*dignity of having both arms temporarily out of commission - but that he is been forced, by fate, whimsy, perversity, Heaven and Hell, *whatever* - into this completely bizarre do-over in the first place.

The mere fact that he's been dumped back in time, that *they've* been dumped back in time *together,* before the point, again, where it all began for them… It doesn't mean one damn thing. Lecter might not intend to commit his sins against him the second time around, but that certainly, *certainly,* doesn't erase the fact that he'd committed them in the first place.

Yes, Will thinks as he pokes at his lackluster lunch tray and watches report after glowing fatuous report unscrolling on every channel on the TV, he is definitely, *definitely* feeling a little bitter.

And there is absolutely nothing he can do about it all.

No, he thinks, sitting up. *That isn't quite accurate.* There is *one* thing he can do.

He can make damned sure that Hannibal *fucking* Lecter knows exactly, *exactly* what he *isn't* getting as a reward.

He reaches across and picks up his phone again, jabbing viciously. It rings twice, the second ring cut off short by...

"Alana Bloom," the familiar voice says.

"Alana. It's Will. I need a favour."

"Hey Will. What's that?" She sounds, unsurprisingly, distracted. "Hold on, hold… There. Okay. I'm here. What is it?"

"I need to go shopping for a new wardrobe. A real one."

There follows a long, considering pause. Will swears he can hear the squeak of chair legs on the floor as the good Dr. Bloom tilts backward, and can see the narrowed look on her face as she contemplates the request, and the possibilities.

"How real are we talking?" she says finally.

"Real enough so that anyone looking at me will say 'he mortgaged his house to pay for all that, and it was worth every damned penny.' I'd rather not actually mortgage my house, but you get the idea."

"Can I ask why? Just out of curiosity? Psychiatric, non-personal curiosity?"

Will had anticipated *that* one coming too, and his reply is as promptly delivered as the invitations for any of Lecter's dinner parties after one of his late-night gourmet shopping sprees at Costco. An unfortunate comparison, but then again, the local isn't famed for its cheery and helpful staff, and the man must surely buy his cleaning supplies, at least, in cut-rate bulk.

"I look fifteen without the beard, and since I now look younger than all of my students, I'm going to need another means of making them take me seriously."

“Somehow I don’t think that’s going to be a problem, Will. Word’s got out. Everyone at the Academy knows now that you were involved in the initiating stages of the takedown, never mind the Shrike.”

“That’s nice. Well?”

“Why not. I have to make a couple more calls right now, but I’ll get back to you on the specifics tonight? I’ll have a better idea of my incoming schedule then, and we can work out the details.”

“Sounds good. And I mean it, Alana,” Will says. “I want the works. I want to look good enough to *eat.* ” He realizes belatedly that, without his own context and chronically snide inner commentary to mitigate things, that might, to the psychiatrist currently treating Abigail Hobbs, be construed as a bit flippant, but she's apparently too tired to take offense, and just sniggers instead.

“Tacky, William. *Shockingly* tacky. That won’t be hard. The beard was nice, but.. Mmmm. We’re all thanking Beverly, believe you me.”

“Uh huh. Bring me real coffee when you do come?”

“Will do. Catch you later!”

And with that, Will flicks off the phone again, and, tossing it back in the drawer, shoves his feet in his slippers, grabs his deck of cards, and heads out of his room and down the hall to the elevator and the fourth floor for an, if not invigorating, at least distracting, game of Snap with Bella Crawford.

Day Eleven

Alana comes to pick him up right after lunch. She is not alone. She leans against the car, laughing helplessly as Will sprawls on his back on the grassy strip between the employee-and-visitor parking lots, fending off tongues and paws and floods of doggy drool at enthusiastic random. The dogs whine and wriggle ecstatically, sniffing and licking at his every available inch.

Will wonders if he smells, and tastes, different now that he is well again. If they can tell that he’s not quite the same person as they all knew and loved just two weeks ago now. If they do, they don’t seem to mind one bit.

He manages to stagger up, brushing himself off and retrieving his duffle as the canine army before him plops itself in a neat and tidy row, ears perked and awaiting his orders with only the smallest of wriggles and whines of uncontained excitement. He scratches ears at affectionate random as Alana, too, recovers, retrieving the dropped backpack and tossing it in the trunk of the car. The dogs break formation immediately as she emerges with a familiar fast-food bag in hand. Will laughs, accepting it as she passes it off to him, opening it and breaking off pieces of the greasy, fragrant treasure-trove of hashbrowns within.

“Peons,” he says to them affectionately, and to Alana - “How’d you know?”

“Bev texted me,” she says. “She said you’d mentioned that they were addicted during one of your first conversations, and suggested that I go in prepared.”

“I can’t believe you drove all the way out to Wolf Trap and back again.”

“I didn’t, actually. I was at Quantico earlier when you called me. It was on the way.”

“Why’d she text you in the first place?’ he inquires, diverted, as he ushers the dogs back in and slides into the front seat. “I didn’t think you two were that chummy."

“I am, apparently, one of her predestined pinky-sworn buds now.” Will gives her an odd look. “Jack recommended me,” she elaborates. “As a resource. The site’s rough, Will. Really, really rough. Hannibal was supposed to be the onsite psych, not just for Lass, but in the aftermath, but he’s off till he feels a bit better. I can’t fly in; I’m on chronic emergency call here for a couple of my other cases, but she’s called me on a couple of her breaks. Jimmy and Brian too."

“There’s no one else?”

“It’s rough,” Alana says again. “The whole team gone in is going to need therapy for years, and they can’t afford the emotional face-to-face right now. There’s just too much to do, and they can’t break focus. There’s too much at stake in terms of identifying victims, reliably, and they don’t want to let Hannibal down. Not after everything he went through, and is going to go through yet. And once they all start crying, they’re not going to be able to stop, you know?”

“Am I allowed to ask for any details at all?”

“No.” She pulls out of the parking lot. “You’ve got a good friend there, you know that, Will?”

“In Bev?”

“Yes. I heard she walked in, looked around, stepped out, called Jack and said that if the words ‘Call in Graham’ even crossed his mind, much less his lips at any point, that she was out of there. Permanently, and she would be taking Brian and Jimmy with her.’

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Then she called Bella, and told her to back her up as necessary.”

“What?”

“They got him. They *got* him, and they have everything they need. No question. They don’t need you there, and bringing you in would be both unnecessary and sadistic.” She spins off the ramp onto the main road. “You can test-drive your abilities on another case. Let this one go, Will. The Chesapeake Ripper is dead. Let the rest of us bury what’s left of him, and just… Move on. There’s a Filet-o-Fish in the glove compartment for you. Don’t fall for your canine boy band’s ‘we haven’t eaten since you abandoned us’ looks either; it’s a big fat lie.

The hashbrowns were dessert; they started whining at me for cheeseburgers off the Value Menu as soon as they saw the first Golden Arches off the turnpike, and I gave in just to shut them up.'

Will can't help but laugh.

"You'd make a great mom," he says. "From the kids' perspective anyway." He unwraps the sandwich and takes a huge bite. "You ever thought on it?"

"On what?"

"Having kids."

"Now and again. It's not any kind of immediate imperative. Why, are you offering your services there?" She offers him a curious and speculative look.

"No," Will says after a moment. "I'm not."

"Should I take it personally?"

"No. It's got nothing to do with…" He lowers the sandwich. "There was a woman once. She didn't give me the choice. I had just enough time to get used to the idea - she wasn't adverse to the idea of me being involved, she just didn't feel the need to consult with me beforehand. I was angry, and then I wasn't. And then her family found out, and they *were* angry. Angry enough to arrange to render the point moot, for all three of us."

"I'm so sorry, Will," she says, and he knows she means it. As his friend, not a psychiatrist.

"So am I. So was she."

"Are you still in contact with her?"

"No. I know where she is though."

"Is she happy now?"

"No," Will says bluntly. "She isn't. I intend to amend that soon, though. Very, very soon." He catches her lifted brow. "Don't worry," he reassures her. "I'll go by the book. There's a shitload of entirely verifiable and incriminatory backstory there if you know where to look, and I do."

"Mm. Well, let me know if you need any help. I'd be happy to help you line up your footnotes, on or off the record."

"Uh?"

"Bitches be bitchy," she translates. "I'm a thoroughly modern woman and an absolute proponent of the freedom to choose, but her approach to your initial contribution aside, she didn't get to choose, did she?"

“You consider yourself a bitch?” he asks curiously.

"On occasion. Or rather... Other people consider me a bitch. Given the sadly reliable and predictable situational context, I tend to think of it as a compliment.”

“Mm.” Will swallows the last bite of his sandwich as the dogs all glare at him reproachfully in the rear view mirror. “Is there a club?”

“Mm?”

“A Bitches Be Bitchy Club."

“Brigade," she corrects.

“Uh?”

“It's the Bitches Be Bitchy Brigade. As a matter of fact, there is, and no, you don’t qualify."

“Why not?”

“Because you have a penis.”

“How very politically incorrect and exclusionist of you, Dr. Bloom. That’s hardly my fault, you know. I was born this way.”

“Mm,” she agrees. “What can you do.”

“Is Dr. Lecter a member?" She's good, he reflects. He has no doubt she's processed the little dig, but she refuses to acknowledge it with so much of a blink.

“No. He’s a whaddayacallit… Supporting associate. Doesn’t intrude or assume; that would be ill-mannered to say the least, but he’s always happy to cater upon request."

It hurts… Physically *hurts*... But somehow, Will manages to refrain from offering up the silver-plattered bitchy retort.

“Dare I ask?"

“Oh, you know. The standard. His last menu included chilled rocky mountain and prairie oysters as an appetizer, braised and skewered hearts and edible flowers on a platter as the entree, and blood of the enemy presented as a quite remarkable *sanguinaccio dolce* and served again in blood orange shells carved as sawn half-skulls. You know what the oysters refer to, right?” Alana asks belatedly.

“I do.”

“Well, he enjoys the metaphorical,” she says. “And has a tremendous sense of humour under all that starch.”

“The fish sandwich was lovely,” Will offers politely. “Really. It was very thoughtful of you to take my proclivities into account there.”

“Uh huh. So. What kind of budget are we talking on here?" she asks practically. “Realistically speaking?”

“Jack sent me an e-mail earlier saying that he’s taking advantage of the mood down at Central to put in a rec that I get not only the official commendation for both cases, the Shrike and the Ripper, but a bonus too.”

“That could take months to come through.”

“Yeah, but he said he recommended the certain amount and would email me again to let me know what he thought my chances are after he talked to them this afternoon. I’d say they’re pretty good, though he didn’t give me a figure. Here, I’ll check right now and see if… Yup. There it is. Let’s see, let’s… Huh. Will you look at that.”

Alana leans over his shoulder, keeping one eye on the road as the relevant screen scrolls up, and very nearly crashes the car. “Holy *fuck,* Will! And it’s been approved already?”

“Apparently so. I think that justifies taking out the bridge loan against my savings account, wouldn’t you say?”

“Damn,” she says again, enviously. “Not that you don’t rate it, but… *Damn.* That is a *lot* of money.” She returns her attention to the road. “This changes things. All the things. How do you feel about Jimmy Choo?”

“I don’t think the particular look is really what I’m aiming for, Alana.”

“Not for you, dumbass. I’m claiming a personal shopper’s fee now. And I feel no guilt whatsoever, not now that I’ve seen all those zeroes. So there.”

Will laughs, and settles beside her more comfortably, reaching out after a moment to pick up the brand new not-iPod (apparently her brand loyalty is on hiatus) beside her.

“Anything you in the mood for?” he inquires, thumbing through the playlist.

“Nope. Pick your poison.”

Will scrolls again, then stills, thumb hovering… He taps ‘play,’ and sets it down, leaning back and closing his eyes. He can almost see her smile as the soft strains of the soundtrack from ‘Inception’ builds and builds, rushing over him like cool water and shifting stars and the dream within a dream, half drowning him in an uncertain wash of raw, undirected time through which, it would seem to demonstrate, that his end is his beginning after all.

“Good movie, that,” she observes. “Excellent choice, for a recovered encephalitic patient.”

“Eh. I’m really not that deep. Or ironic. Or whatever. I just like the music.”

And this too is true, he finds, and for the first time (again, and as it had with Beverly, no matter that it's all revisitation, it yet *feels* like the first time) that he is experiencing fully and completely and without compromise, nothing but the gift of the immediate present moment. He opens his eyes and turns his head, absorbing the unbroken, perfect line of his companion's profile. She glances sideways. His lips tilt up at her. He reaches out and touches her hand, resting on the steering wheel as a touchstone, not in the dark, but in time again.

"You okay?" she asks, obviously surprised.

"Yeah," Will says. "I am. Just… Really glad you're here. That you're the one who's here. With me. Right now. It feels like a beginning, you know? Not of anything in particular, but at the same time… Of everything."

And Alana gives him another long look, out of the corner of her eye - then pulls over. Will blinks as she unfastens her seatbelt, and his, and tugs at his hand. He comes, but instead of kissing him, she just slides her arms around him and buries her face in his shoulder. He holds her tight. When he pulls back a bit, her face is wet.

"What is it?"

"I'm supposed to be a *doctor*. And I didn't even realize you were sick!"

"Maybe you didn't," Will concedes. "But you're not *my* doctor, are you? You're my friend. And my friend knew. It's why she- you - told Jack to fuck off and leave me alone, when he first came in to recruit me."

"Jack's a dick," she says soggily, against his shoulder again. "He's a great detective, but he's a complete dick."

"Ah well." He detaches gently and reaches across to refasten her seat belt, and then his again. "What can you do. Sad truth, but into every life, a little dick must fall." He catches her grin, and rolls his eyes. "Just drive," he orders. "Also? No. Not. *Happening*. He's not a little dick, he's a big dick, and that, in case you haven't processed, doesn't count for a single thing when you're the one inclined to run the show."

Alana sighs mock-sadly, but swings out onto the road again. Will tilts his head back. One of the dogs - Winston- snuffles over and around the rest, and sticks his tongue in his ear. Will swats at him. Winston retreats, but immediately returns, settling for resting his head on his shoulder.

Wolf Trap, Virginia

Will blinks as they enter the front room. The place is as scrubbed, shining and polished as only a very scrubbed, shining and polished place can be.

"What the..."

"Here." Alana hands him an envelope on the side table. Will slips it open.

Welcome home, babe!

I couldn't help myself. I checked your fridge for beer when I came to check on the fam, and all was madness and despair. The bodies there duly disposed of according to all accepted hazmat protocols, I called in a licensed industrial cleaning service. They're discreet, and signed the proposed non-disclosure agreement without arguing. They left your table and your lures alone, though. I told them you'd be very cross with me if they didn't, and probably wouldn't spank me as my punishment. They completely understood, and reassured me that all would remain as untouched and pure as again, I'm not.

I don't suppose you'd make me a pair of earrings based on the design of the red and orange and gold jobby? I'll thank you properly while I'm on my knees begging for your forgiveness for any unwelcome presumption, and right before I help you dirty the place up again.

Schmeckies,

Bevvy

Will leans against the door and laughs till he cries. Alana regards him with abject alarm. He just hands off the note and resumes laughing. She reads, and joins him before making her way to the kitchen and the refrigerator. It is so clean it squeaks when it opens. She extracts two bottles of lager, cracks them both with the appropriate tool from an impeccably organized drawer, and boosts herself up beside him on the counter as they drink.

"You really do look good," she observes. "Younger. Lighter. More…" She pauses.

"More… What?'

"It's like I said. It's just so obvious now," she says. "Encephalitis can simmer on the back burner for decades before it flares to the point of the actively apparent. You've been sick a long, long time, haven't you?"

"Yeah. I have. I don't think I've ever felt this good, Alana." He lowers the bottle and leans in impulsively. Not for another hug, though, and this time, she meets him more than half way. She mmms, and links an arm around his neck, hauling him in. When they break apart...

"I've wanted to do that for a long, long time," she says. "You know that?'

"Me too," he admits. She drinks again.

"Call me when Bev's done with you," she orders. "She's not yet. I'm good with that. She's good for you."

"Does that mean you've accepted my complete lack of interest in Lecter?"

"No. Not because I can't accept it, but because as a psychiatrist, never mind your friend, I'm refusing to facilitate your denial."

"Is that what we're calling it."

“It is, because that’s what it is. It’s alright.” She pats his arm. “No rush, really. The slow burn trope will just make the ending that much more satisfying. All around.”

“Alana…”

“Will...” she mimicks. She catches his flat look. “Oh, come on. Will you *please* lighten up? I’m just teasing you.”

“No you’re not, and for the record? Still would rather do the dogs. Accept it, and drop it. Now, or I’ll find someone else to go shopping with me.”

She pulls back, and he watches as, inevitably he supposes, the eyes of the friend retreat behind the face of the psychiatrist.

“It’s not just dislike, is it?” she observes. “You really hate him. And not on the abstract associative level.”

Will just swallows more beer. His body feels heavy again, older, but his mind… His mind feels like a shining, sharpened razor, polished to the biting, bloody edge.

It feels good to do bad things to bad people. Yes. It does. When did I... What did I ever do to you, though, to qualify as bad in your book? What did I do?

Nothing, that’s what, because bad doesn’t exist in your book, does it, so there was the strawman right from the beginning. Offered up as a diversionary rationale based on what you sensed that I do believe, because you knew I would need a way to rationalize your *behaviour - not my behaviour, but* yours - *at the end of it all, right from the beginning. Whether things went the way you hoped or not. Even now... You’re not sorry that you did those things to me, not one little bit. Regret might be in your vocabulary, but remorse? Totally different kettle of not-fish.*

All you were thinking when I came to you, and said ‘let’s wait to have our chat till after I’m cured’ was ‘hmm, that could be interesting, a do-over to see what happens if I’d taken another path?' Because this… That’s… That’s what this is for you, isn’t it. After all. All it ever could be, no matter what you say. You’re just mixing up your script a bit, to accommodate for an experiment in which you’ll make different choices. Not better ones, or moral ones, because morality doesn’t exist in your worldview again, just... Different ones. You’ve decided that you want to see what happens if you act according to one set of human rules over another, right from the get-go.

You *might not believe in evil, but I… I was never* that *far gone. I might have the capacity to understand you better now. I might see you, as clearly as you’ve ever imagined or hoped I might…*

But just because I understand you, just because I see you, doesn’t mean that I’m automatically and therefore bound to share your philosophy. You may have thought you were punishing me with the knife in the gut… Forcing penance after my atonement for my betrayal… But if there’s one thing time grants you, it’s perspective, and I wasn’t the one who ever needed to atone.

You said that you forgave me. And you punished me for my sins against you, but… The strawman rears his head again, because you never actually asked me to forgive you, did you? You said 'Will you forgive me?' *Throw in a couple of extremely pertinent punctuation marks as place settings, and what do you get? 'Will, you forgive me.' Statement, not question or request, or rather... Instruction. Not quite the same thing, Dr. Lecter, is it, and it wasn't about what you recognizing that you'd hurt me after all. It was about offering me a vision of what you knew I wanted to hear… My own regret projected toward you and turned back toward me per your dutiful exercising of standardized script posited by those who* do *believe in good and evil. Who require, and demand, as I told you I did and would, while I was still locked up… A reckoning.*

Oh yes. I see you now. And I see this too.

This.. This is your idea of heaven, Hannibal Lecter. Better than any place or future you could have built for us, hidden not just in space, but the past.

Your *idea of heaven. Your idea of a* reward, *for both of us, for the one experiment concluded and the game well played.*

And it's my idea of hell.

"It's not mitigated now that you understand a little more on where he's coming from?" Alana is saying.

"No," Will says flatly again. "It's not. I'm not a psychiatrist, Dr. Bloom. I don't feel vocationally compelled to help him bandage up his wounded, traumatized soul."

And the psychiatrist, again, regards him in the silence that follows *that*.

"That's really cold, Will," she says finally. "You were genuinely worried about him when he called. Don't tell me you weren't."

"That doesn't mean I plan to volunteer as his therapist. My time's worth as much as his, and I'm already mandated to sit in his office when he gets back and discuss my problems with him. I'm not wasting the hours I have after that discussing his. That's what Bedelia Du Maurier is for."

Alana sighs. Deeply. Will had never quite processed in his previous life just how annoying that habit of hers is. Weirdly, it lightens his mood. He pokes her. "Keep doing that," he says. "And I'll have to relegate you to the position of 'annoying and bossy interfering big sister.'"

"Keep doing… What?"

"Sighing. In exasperation. *Indulgently."*

In response, she just leans in and kisses him again. This time, though…

"Shit," she says, disappointed as she pulls away. "So much for that."

"Mm. Alana," Will says after a moment. "Can I ask you a favour?"

“Name it.”

He turns, one leg tucked under him, facing her. She does the same.

“Look me in the eyes,” he requests. She raises an eyebrow at him, but obliges. Her gaze is warm and steady and friendly, if concerned… He holds it, counting silently.

“Am I allowed to blink?’ she inquires after a minute or so.

“Yeah,” he says, and slides his glasses back. “Interesting.”

“What is?”

“I didn’t feel any compulsion to look away. The nurse noticed it when she came in last night, before I went to sleep. She said that she could tell I was feeling better, because she’d been watching from her first shift with me, and my ability to meet her eyes and hold them had been improving exponentially with every day of treatment. I asked her why she thought that was, and she said that with the kind of chronic headaches and low-grade disorientation I’d felt, as long as I can remember… My eyes were likely and habitually drawn to the path of least stimulus, not just for neuro-atypical, but bio-atypical reasons. Faces shift according to expression and mood. So do eyes. They flick, they blink, the colours dilate and whatnot… It’s not just a spectrum issue after all.”

“Maybe it’s part of the autonomic aversion you have for Hannibal?” she suggests. “All those mixed plaids and paisleys?’

He snerfs up beer at that.

"Hey, I like the guy, and there’s no question that he wears everything perfectly. And it all may look good on him, but that’s him, really. It doesn’t mean that his choices are inherently aesthetic in and of themselves.”

“Uh huh. I’m onto you, Dr. Bloom. You’re just presenting that hypothesis now because it provides you with a rationale to get me to get *him* naked. And to report back. In the name of *science*.”

She winks at him, and cracks up. He laughs back.

“Can I ask," he says, sliding back and sitting fully cross-legged, “how Abigail Hobbs is doing?"

Alana waggles a hand. “She’ll eat a bit now,” she says. “Raw fruit and vegetables. Milk, straight from sealed and packaged cartons. It’s going to be a life-long habit, I think. She’ll never trust anything she doesn’t prepare for herself again.”

Will hesitates.

“I know there’s doctor-patient confidentiality,” he says. “But… Has she said anything about me, in any context you can discuss?"

“Actually, she has.”

Will blinks.

“She wanted me to wait and see if you asked,” she says. “Before I did bring it up.”

“Brought… What up?”

“She asked me how you were doing. I had said that she wasn’t the only one with dietary issues as a result, and that you only eat fish now. She was surprised, but said that maybe you can swap recipes sometime."

“She wasn’t upset because I’m the one who brought in her father?’

“No. She admires your restraint, actually. She said to tell you no regrets, that she’s been wanting to work it quite a bit higher for quite awhile now.”

Will stares at her. Behind his eyes, the image of two tiny, steaming teacups abruptly blur and coalesce into one, then divide into…

Good things come in threes.

“What else,” he says, detached.

“Nothing much.” She shrugs. “It’s not surprising. After the kind of trauma she’s been through, both short and long-term…”

She stops, tellingly, her eyes not moving from his. Will can feel her mentally urging him on, can see it in her every expression. *I can’t tell you, I can’t tell you, but I won’t deny it if you figure it out...*

He closes his eyes. The pendulum swings. He hears, behind the hum, his own breathing and hers. The boundaries are cleared, more pronounced. He sees, hears, senses… But he is yet himself.

He opens them.

“When,” he says.

"Three days ago.” Alana's shoulders slump.

“And the news hasn’t been released, because…”

She says nothing. Will runs his hand through his hair.

“Is Dr. Du Maurier upset with herself?’ he asks. “That she didn’t see it coming?”

Alana’s lovely face actually twists in distaste at that.

“Not nearly as upset as she should be,” she says. “A first year pre-med student could have seen it coming. Hannibal says, frankly, that he didn’t remind her because it should have been

impossible for her to miss. Which, of course, is exactly what she's claiming she did, and it's complete and utter bullshit. Husband a mass murderer and cannibal, feeding her the victims that she herself prepared and served, her entire life-as-she-knew-or-assumed-it turned completely and irrevocably to dust… Louise Hobbs should have been under suicide watch from the second they brought her into the assessment facility."

"Never mind the implications there that as all of them looked like Abigail he was literally eating and mounting his daughter. Did he actually…" He knows the answer, but...

"She won't discuss that. With anybody."

"But her mother thought so," Will surmises. "She suspected something for a long time, didn't she. He'd take Abigail away, on trips, on vacations… His obsessive interest in her as she started blossoming toward adulthood… Mrs. Hobbs didn't suspect that he was a murderer, but she sure as hell suspected he was abusing their daughter, didn't he. And she never said anything, because they'd always brought home the meat as proof that they'd been doing exactly what he said they'd been doing… Hunting. Every meal was an act of thanksgiving for her that she'd been proven wrong, and she encouraged his hobby, not because of budgetary implications, but because it vindicated her ability to ignore her worries. How did she do it."

Alana makes an extremely small, indicative gesture across her own throat. He winces. Hard.

"Yeah," she says. "It's amazing, really, the damage you can do with a safety razor if you're really determined. And. You know. When you're not being monitored because your so-called *doctor* is too busy off powdering her cleavage and checking the seams on her silk stockings to mind her fucking *job.'"*

She knocks back the last of her beer. Will slides down and put his bottle, and hers, in the recycling bin. He pulls her down, holding her tight. She is shaking, not with grief, but with indignation and fury and sheer professional *affront.*

"The worst part," she says into his shoulder. "Is that nobody, nobody is going to *care,* Will. Nobody's going to…" She swallows a sob. "Bedelia *fucking* du Maurier won't even get investigated, because nobody cares that her patient, the woman - the human being - that she was treating - died because of her negligence. They'll be *glad* she's dead. And she was just… Louise Hobbs loved her husband. She wanted to believe the best of him. She was … Maybe she did have a responsibility to investigate her suspicions, to ask Abigail if he was hurting her... No, she definitely did… But it's like you just said. He had that covered too; he was literally cramming the evidence that she wanted, that would prove him innocent of the one crime and guilty of the others, down her throat. *She died thinking that it was all her fault*. That it was all on *her. "*

Will presses his lips to her head. He wishes, more than almost anything he's wished in his life, that he could answer the unspoken, desperate plea in her voice, and tell her that she is wrong. He pulls back a bit when she is cried out, and wipes her face with his sleeve.

"She'll pay," he says quietly. "Bedelia Du Maurier *will* pay. One way or the other, Alana."

"How can you be sure?"

“You told me that Freddie Lounds was causing trouble. Maybe… Not maybe, but definitely, I’m guessing… She now knows what happened to Mrs. Hobbs, and suspects why. She’s going to be scrounging for good copy after what went down in St. Louis. Even if she gets off on whatever charges they all lay on her… She’ll be able to report the truth as nothing *but* the truth on this one. And she will. Something tells me that no matter how much of a bottom feeder she is, and the subject matter considered, she’ll want justice for this one.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because she’s a loathsome bitch. And them’s the rules of the jungle. Bitches look out for bitches unless or until there are children involved.”

“You’ve never even met Bedelia. How can you know *she’s* a bitch?’

“Is she?”

“She drifts through life in slow motion, emanating her own dreamy, pastel haze,” Alana says sourly, pulling away and going to the sink to splash her face. “It’s her superpower. Every time I see her I want to pin her down and pour a quadruple strength triple espresso down her throat just to see what happens.”

“That doesn’t make her a bitch, Alana.”

“No, but it’s a symptom of her absolute narcissism. Never mind petty. She was pissed because, of the three of us and the three of them… I got Abigail and Hannibal got Hobbs. In her mind, Mrs. Hobbs was the least interesting patient, and because she’s older and more experienced than me, she thought she rated the daughter. Hannibal explained to her the same thing that you’d posited to Jack - that it wasn’t about seniority, but of straight-up aesthetic appearance. Abigail was more likely to respond to a doctor who resembled a sister of hers, in place of the family she’d lost, never mind the associated confession-to the-resembled-victim effect. And I’m the right age, with dark hair, and we’re the same height and all.” She reached for a tissue. “Then she wanted you. And you picked Hannibal instead.”

“Why would she want *me?”*

“Because Hannibal likes you, duh.” She blew. “She’s his shrink, but you should just *see* her dial up the gently swaying hips and slow and breathy enunciation around him. It’s absolutely disgusting. I told him once that he should just fuck her already and disappoint her intentionally with it so she’ll go away, but she amuses him, even if he’s too polite to say so.”

“And what did he say to *that?”*

“That he enjoys watching her hips anyway. I asked him how *that* was polite, and he said that as long as she’s putting it all out there, it’d be rude not to demonstrate equally active, however gentlemanly and subtle, appreciation.’

“Urgh.”

“Yeah. Gross, right? Anyway, she knows him well enough, never mind he’s not above dropping a hint or two in therapy to get her goat, to know that he’s interested in you. She wanted the opportunity to check out, from her point of view, the competition. To see what you’ve got that she doesn’t. And he offered her the opportunity, but *you* were the one who declined her. So… Sucks to be her, and she’s sulking now.”

“So why did he want you to tell her about Dolarhyde before it hit the media?"

“He’s being solicitous and considerate. Anticipating her feelings and *needs*. Which is more than she did for Louise Hobbs, right?’

“Wow,” Will says after a moment. “How passive-aggressively reproving of him. So what did she say when you told her about the take-down?’

“I didn’t. Haven’t. I left her a message because she hates me now too and won’t pick up when she sees my number. And she hasn’t called me back because she enjoys the thought of me wasting my time chasing her down, but as I, at least, am a good psychiatrist and don’t believe in feeding into people’s neuroses, she has no one to blame but herself.”

Will laughs outright. “Bitches be bitchy?” he teases her. She grins reluctantly.

“She’s just not that special,” she says. “No matter what she thinks. She didn’t deserve the advance notice. Maybe it’ll get the message across that when it comes down to it, she’s as much a schlub as the rest of us, no matter the chronic ambient mood lighting and accompanying pensive soundtrack.”

“She’ll try to get Miriam Lass, you know.”

Alana snorts. “Oh, *that’s* not going to happen.' She examines her second bottle. "Not to sound indelicate, but I’ve had exactly half a slice of toast and a third of a cup of coffee for breakfast, and no lunch yet. I’m starving. You mind if I raid the fridge for something to soak this up?"

“Go ahead. I don’t think really much here though, I…” He opens the fridge. It is crammed full. The cupboards are in much the same state. “On the other hand… Maybe I do? Mm. Food.”

“I’m not much of a cook, but I can manage a decent risotto. Check under the cupboard there.” She nods. Will goes to explore, emerging with a quite-decent-if-not-extravagant bottle of white. “Perfect.”

“Do you think she’d be interested in actually talking to me,” he asks as she roots through the cabinets, emerging with a carton of organic vegetable stock and the rice. “Abigail, I mean?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. She’s doing a bit better, like I said, but she’s in rough, rough shape yet, Will. Angry. Really… Really angry. The restraints aren’t just because she’s not eating. Betrayal doesn’t even begin to cover it, and well…” She hesitates. “You’re better, but your empathy… I don’t want you to suffer any setbacks there.”

“I understand,” he reassures her. ”And I won’t. Has Hannibal been in any kind of contact with her at all?”

“No. He’s been kind of busy, yeah? He hasn’t even been to see her father more than once or twice yet, though reports say the only things he’s got to say so far is ‘My precious, I wants her,” and “More morphine, bitch’ to the nurses."

“So much for his much vaunted respect for women.”

“Mm. They hold their own, though. Standard response so far: ‘You’ll get more than the standard every four hours when you get down on your knees and apologize for being such a … Oops. Ah well. What can you do, then. Don’t call us, we’ll call you.”

“Mm. Well, I’d like to see her, but don’t tell him, alright? He’s stressed enough, and needs to concentrate on his recovery and dealing with his own trauma. Time enough to fill him in later, if that’s what Abigail wants again anyway.”

Alana nods. Will eyes her, and reaching out, physically turns her by the shoulder to face him. She blinks at him, mostly to cover the fact that she’s averting her eyes in obvious and pre-emptive guilt. He takes her by the chin and forces her head around, not roughly, but...

“I want your promise, Dr. Bloom,” he says directly. ‘I know he’s your friend, but if you want my help with Abigail Hobbs, and I know this is what this is about; you’re really walking the professional line here in terms of confidentiality, which means you’re getting more than a little desperate - we’re going by the book here. You’re Abigail’s psychiatrist, not Lecter, and if you want my involvement… Officially, and unofficially, as far as he’s concerned, I’m *not* involved.”

“Fine.” She actually looks a bit sullen. “I promise. But that won’t work forever, you know. Probably not more than three days after he gets back from Missouri. There’s just not much that keeps that man’s professional interest down, never mind the personal. And he’s interested in her, *and* you. He *will* discover the connection and put the pieces together, whether I tell him or not.”

“Just promise me you won’t be the one who does tell him. Or anyone else, for that matter.“

“I already said I wouldn’t. Why is this so important?"

“It might not be important in the long run, not pragmatically but it’s important to me. I blew her life away at the kneecaps,” Will says. “Cut it out from under her. I won’t say I feel responsible, but there’s more than professional concern there. Lecter was there, but he was just auditing. He had nothing, really, to do with any of it, and he’s not officially my shrink yet, so nothing yet, officially, to do with me. And for now… I think it’s important to keep it that way. To carry over my newfound ability to draw boundaries between myself and … Everything… On every level.”

“Alright,” she concedes unwillingly. “I really approve of you giving up meat, by the way. If you were my patient, I would have suggested it from the first session.”

“Why’s that?’

“Professional distance. When you leave work, you should leave it behind you. You wallow, not put too fine a point on it, and I’m sorry for the gruesome imagery, in rendered meat all day. When you’re eating it again, no matter the animal source, you’re internalizing it, your job again, since it all, humans included, looks pretty much the same once butchered.” She puts a bag of shallots on the counter. “Fish looks nothing like red meat, human or otherwise, so there’s no psychological association there.”

“Huh,” Will says after a moment. “That… Makes a lot of sense, actually.”

“Never mind that there’s a modicum of residual fear-enhanced hormones in all slaughtered animals,” she adds. “Scientific fact, that. You deal with enough fear, your own and that of others on the empathic level, without having to physically process and digest it from the abused and murdered source."

“Erhm. What?’

“Factory farming. Bit of a pet peeve of mine. I eat meat, but not off the grocery shelf. Bleh.”

“Uh huh.” And doesn’t *that* bring history all around again... Will’s gaze falls on her left hand, still bare of jewelry, as he recalls his own words to Bella Crawford at Quantico.

“Bella,” he says.

“Yes?’

“Are there any other unresolved cases that have bothered him over the years? That it would offer you peace to see resolved again, before…”

She eyes him.

“I’m a pretty good fisherman is all. And now that my head’s cleared… I’m going to need to test things out, to see how much was me, and how much was the encephalitis.”

“I’ll think about it,” she says. “And let you know.

“Will?” Alana pokes at him. He snaps back sharply, refocusing. “You okay? Where’d you go?”

“I’m fine. And not far enough,” he says grimly. “Not *nearly* far enough.”

“Okay. Well, now that you’re back, grab me the tomatoes and cream and butter.”

Will pulls the door open and removes a bag of tomatoes. Sets it on the counter. Pulls a pound of butter out of the shining white compartment. The familiar name brand shimmers up at him from the gaudily near-gilt paper wrapping. Alana peers around his shoulder and makes a face. Plucks it from his hand and drops it in the bin.

“What did you do that for?’

“We don’t eat anything Verger-made,” she says with finality as she retrieves a bottle of olive oil from the cupboard “They’re evil. Even for factory farmers.”

“Ah.” He pulls out a carton of non-offending cream and a brick of organic parmesan. “Are these safe?

“Yeah. Chop these.” She pushes the tomatoes over. “And hand me another beer.”

“Am I driving you home tonight, then?’

“You have a spare room, right? A clean one, even?’

“Am I on suicide watch too?’

“Nah. This is just really good, and I don’t have work in the morning, so I don’t want to stop.”

And Will laughs yet again. Alana lips quirk at him sideways.

“Good health looks good on you,” she says. “Never mind the real smile. Will you listen to me when I do give you a bit of professional advice? Never mind that I’m your bossy big sister now?’

“Sure.”

“Don’t let Jack push you around. He’s a good guy, even if he is a dick, but with what’s coming with Bella… He’s going to be throwing himself full-tilt into his work. And he *will* take you with him, especially since you look so much better now.”

“Can you call her now,” he says suddenly.

“Who?”

“Abigail.”

Alana hesitates, searching his face… Then shrugs and reaches for her own phone, dialing rapidly. She works her way through several extensions, and holds up a finger. Finally…

“Abigail,” she says. Her voice is gentle, yet firm and solid and reassuring. Will smiles a little at the sound as he resumes chopping. “It’s Dr. Bloom. No, not tonight. I’m having dinner with a friend. No.” She laughs. “No date. We’re just celebrating his own release from the hospital. Mm. How’s he looking? Much better. Quite tasty, actually, and that’s not even counting the risotto we’re whipping up.”

Will offers her a finger around the knife. She offers him one right back around her beer bottle, with a sweet smile as she continues to talk.

“He asked me how you’re doing, so I relayed your message. Yes. He was wondering if you’d be up to me bringing him by in the next day or two. Maybe tomorrow evening, if that suits? We’ve got a big all-day shopping trip planned; he’s signed off on the complete makeover,

and... I know. Silly boy. He won't know what hit him. No, nothing heavy, and he promises he's got no ulterior motives. He just figures… In a way, the two of you are in this together."

She pauses and listens. For a second, her face flickers in indecision.

"Are you sure?" A beat then.. "Alright. Here he is."

Will puts down the knife, wiping his hands on the seat of his jeans, and picks up the phone. She takes it back, presses speaker and returns it.

"Hello, Abigail," he says. "This is Will Graham.'

There is the sound of soft, ragged breathing at the end of the phone. He waits.

"Hello, Mr. Graham," Abigail Hobbs says finally. "How are you?'

He can't help but smile a little at the sound of her voice, closing his eyes as the memories pour over him, clear as the sunlit river on a perfect September day.

"It's just Will. I'm good," he says. "Actually. Better than I've been in a long, long time. What about you? How are you holding up?"

"Not very well," she says. It is half sob, half laugh. She cuts it off immediately. "My mom died."

"I know, sweetie. Dr. Bloom told me. I'm so, so sorry. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, actually. I don't have the right to ask this," she says. "But … There won't be any money from the house. They're confiscating it. The courts. Everything. Even my college fund. They'll just… They'll throw her away. And none of it… *None* of it… Was ever, ever her fault."

"Don't you worry," he reassures her. "I'll take care of everything."

"I don't want anybody to know," she says. He has an idea, exactly, of who 'anybody' involves. "Maybe… Maybe you could have her cremated? And scatter her in your river? Dr. Bloom told me you have a river behind your house. I'll pay you back one day, I swear, and in the meantime, I'll write a note releasing her to you. She's waiting… They're waiting till I decide what I want. I'm eighteen now. It's my decision. But they can't - won't - wait much longer."

"I'll arrange it," Will promises. "First thing tomorrow."

There is another long, long pause. Alana rinses the rice under the cool water, keeping half an eye and both ears on him.

"Can you bring me some risotto," Abigail says finally. "If there's any left? The food here's really horrible."

“I will. Abigail?’

“Yeah?’

“None of this was your fault,” Will says, choosing his words carefully. “None of it. At any point. Nobody blames you, sweetie. Especially not me. You just… You got suckered in. Over your head, right from the beginning. It could only go one way, once it got started. Once *he* got started. And you… You weren’t in control at any point. Of any of it. So I don’t… It would mean a lot, okay… If you’d try to work a bit on seeing things the way they are, as opposed to the way he told you they were? That he told you that they had to be?’”

A stifled sob sounds, and another and another. He waits her out, patiently. Behind his eyelids, the clear, sunlit water of the river shimmers, lapping around them both.

“You’re not upset?’ Abigail’s voice says finally, soggily. “At what…” She hesitates, again phrasing her own words carefully so that it could reference her father as easily as Hannibal. “At what he made you do? I mean… I understand that it was what you had to do. Now. But he still put you in that position. At having to take him down. That couldn’t have been… I know it wasn’t… Easy.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Will agrees. “But it’s what his actions rated, and it’s really amazing besides, you know, what a bit of time to revisit everything, a proper timely diagnosis and a boatload of antibiotics and steroids will do for your sense of perspective. It’s like I’ve had a complete systems reset back to a point that I’ve never known existed. Mental clarity doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

“Good. Because you looked really, really shitty in the last photo I saw of you. Like, on-the-verge of-death shitty.”

“Likewise, I’m sure. Stay off of Freddie Lounds’ site,” he advises. “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that she specializes in shoddy press and unflattering pictures.”

That actually earns him a small laugh.

“I’m alive.” Will says firmly. “And so are you. The rest… We’ll figure it out together.” He shifts, leaning against the counter. “Can I bring you anything besides the risotto? I *am* going on that all-urban-jungle shopping expedition tomorrow, after all.’

“Do you cut hair?’

“No. But I can certainly switch up your look with it anyway, if that’s what you’re aiming for.”

“Okay. Dye too?’

“What colour?"

“Something really tacky and hideous,” Abigail says. ”Or at the very least... Aesthetically impolite?”

He sniggers. She sniggers back.

“You got it. You rest now, okay? Risotto, haircut-and-dye and a surprise just for you coming up. Oh, and I’ll take pictures as we shop, and have Dr. Bloom forward them to you at random intervals during the day.”

“Sounds good. Bye, Will.”

“See you later,” he corrects. “Say it with me now.”

“See you later,” Abigail Hobbs obliges. “Will?”

“Mm?”

“Next time,” she says. “If there ever is a next time… Aim a little higher? Maybe at the anatomical halfway point between. You know. Here and there?"

And Will guffaws, in spite of the stinging tears.

“Will do, baby doll,” he says. “Good drugs have made a brand new man of me, and let me tell you… I plan to take full advantage of all second chances offered me, revisited and otherwise.”

A wicked little giggle sounds, loudly enough to echo through the speaker. There is a click. He hands the phone back. Alana stares at him, dumbfounded.

“What,” she manages. “Was *that*, Will Graham?’

“You know your predestined pinky-sworn buds when you see them? Or hear them? Whatever. Add more to the pan there. We’ve promised her we’d bring leftovers.” He relents at her disbelieving look. “She’s looking for a lifeline. I’m the right age too, right? With the dark hair and light eyes? She doesn’t want a sister after all; that’s probably why you’re having so much trouble. She wants a big brother to lean on. The big brother who rescued her.”

“That makes sense,” she allows, and sits down with a thud. “God. I’m so just *tired,* Will.” She looks on the verge of tears. Will comes and pulls her in again.

“I’ve got you,” he says, as he had to Abigail. “We’ll figure it out. Together.”

“I have to say,” Alana says, wiping her face. “That I like this new improved you. Though I still don’t believe for a second that you’re a top.”

“That’s just because I’m so short.” He tweaks her nose. “I stand on my toes for no man. That means they either have to get horizontal, or on their knees. And you’ve seen my way with lures, right? It translates. Once I’ve got ‘em hooked, all that’s left is to play them and bring them in to satisfy my hunger.”

She considers that, and him.

“What?"

“Just thinking about how you’d look in leather,” she says. “Mm.”

“Hot,” Will says promptly. “Really, really hot. But hot without the night-sweats hot. No chills, fevers, seizures and Hiroshima level migraines.”

“So… Win-win, all around?"

He winks, pops a chunk of shallot in his mouth, and reaches over to crank up the radio.

Port Haven Psychiatric Facility

Baltimore, Maryland

Abigail Hobbs’ Room

The Next Evening

“Perfect.” Will steps back and grins. Abigail Hobbs grins back around a huge forkful of imported vegan double chocolate fudge cake. Her lustrous long brown hair is gone, deliberately and fashionably hacked, and that which remains is a quite brilliant turquoise, streaked tidily in a completely clashing shade of lime green. Baxter, Will’s smallest dog, name drawn earlier that from the hatful of his fellow candidates’ names, and thus imported for some much needed one -on-one time after his erstwhile master’s abrupt absence, woofs in approval.

“I love it,” the girl pronounces as she examines her image in the offered mirror. She is wearing baby blue crocs, tight leggings splattered in sunflowers *a la* Van Gogh, and a tight black faux-leather vest, sleeveless and trimmed in mustard yellow and baby blue feathers. The entire effect is eye-wincingly adorable. “I look like a stoner Muppet.”

“You really, really do,” Alana agrees. “Now all you need is a nose ring. And a tongue ring. And…” She nods to Will. He reaches in his pocket. “This.”

Abigail takes the box curiously. Her eyes widen. Inside is…

“What…’

Will reaches over and removes the beautiful little ID bracelet. On it is engraved her mother’s name and birthdate. The links are not links, but dozens of tiny infinity symbols, all linked together. Abigail’s eyes well as he fits it carefully around her slim wrist, and she hurls herself into his arms.

“You shouldn’t have,” she sniffles into his shoulder. “It’s too much.’

“It’s not nearly enough,” he says. “Under the circumstances.” He nods, in turn, to Alana. She pushes up her sleeves, as he does his. Both peel back identical gauze bandages to reveal tiny tattoos of infinity symbols, just on the insides of their wrists.

“What…”

“We’ll remember her for who she was,” he says, and kisses her cheek. “Even if no one else does.”

“She wasn’t perfect.” Abigail wipes her eyes. “She…” Her voice breaks. “She tried… She tried to protect him, she…” She is not just talking about her mother now, Will knows. “She wasn’t perfect, you know?”

“No one is,” Alana says gently. “That’s not what this is about, Abigail. It’s about those bits of her that were perfect to *you* . No matter how flawed she was, how badly she deceived herself, how cruelly and perversely circumstance treated her… You loved her. You don’t have to be perfect to love, or to rate love in this world. Love isn’t *about* rating. It’s just… What we human beings do. And that, if you think about it, *really* think about it… Is pretty damned perfect in and of itself.”

“What am I going to do now?” Tears trickle down her face, into the feathers. They both slide back beside her, one on either side as she huddles back against the wall beside her bed. Will reaches out and retrieves the chocolate cake, feeding them both forkfuls.

“You’re going to start working properly with Dr. Bloom, for one,” he says. “I know it’s hard, really hard, but it’s going to be a long, long road, and we’re going to be dodging landmines all the way.”

“What about my dad?"

“What about him?’

“Do you think they’ll give him the death penalty? Well, not the death penalty, they don’t have that in Minnesota, but… Do you think he could get off on an insanity plea?"

Alana hesitates, then sets her jaw.

“A great deal of that, Abigail,” she says. “May very well depend on your testimony. You saw him every day of your life, after all. Do you think he’s insane?’

The little room is suddenly very quiet.

“No,” she says finally. Flatly. “No. I don’t know what he is. But he’s not insane. He knew what he was doing. All along. He said sometimes that he doesn’t see things the same way as everybody else, but that didn’t - doesn’t - make him insane. It just means he wanted things that he knew he shouldn’t be taking, so he decided the rules against taking them didn’t apply to him. That they were false rules. Artificially imposed ones, against the natural order of things. But he decided that, didn’t he? He didn’t believe it always. Only when I started getting older. Before that… The only difference was that before, he didn’t do the things he

did, and then after... That he did. Otherwise, he's always been the same. It's why he could fool Mom. Why he could fool everybody. Because nothing about him ever changed. Only the things that happened when we were alone."

Alana closes her eyes.

"Do you think he really loves you?" Will asks.

"Yes," she says unhesitatingly. "But it doesn't have anything to do with the things he did. You still decide to do things or not. And he decided to do them. He knew he had options, and what they were, and he decided. Not because they were right, or even because he felt he had to, but because he wanted to do them." She pulled her knees up tightly. "When we went hunting… He said he was honouring the prey. According to the natural order of things. But he wasn't honouring what those girls wanted, was he? Or what I wanted. Only what *he* did. That's not natural at all. Even animals don't do that, and they're as natural as it gets."

Alana listened quietly. Will says nothing.

"He said in the papers that he loved them," Abigail says finally. "That he respected them. But if he'd respected them, he would have cared what they wanted. That's what love is. Caring what other people want. What they need. Taking that into consideration. Not just saying you do, and doing what you want anyway." Her shoulders tighten. "He never..."

Alana, Will reflects, is very good at waiting.

"He talked about honouring everything, in everything he did," the younger woman says. "All the things. But never on whether what he was doing, in and of itself, in the moment, was right or wrong. I think he understood the difference. Maybe he was just replacing the one concept with the other, in his mind. He'll say he was. That he does think they're the same thing. But I know he wasn't. That he knew they weren't the same thing at all. Because those things he did to the girls.. Killing them…" She braces herself visibly. "Eating them… It's pretty obvious, isn't it... He wasn't seeing them. He was seeing me. And if he thought it was the right thing to do, really right, really thought it… He would have done them straight up to me, wouldn't he. So that shows he knew that what he was doing was wrong. Because if he really thought it was all natural, he would have been able to do it to me after all. But he couldn't. He just projected on girls who looked like me. So… No. If he could make that distinction, even deep down… Deep down… He wasn't… Isn't... Insane."

Will puts an arm around her.

"You would," he tells her. "However crass it is to say it, make an excellent psychiatrist. Or lawyer. Or profiler. Whatever the hell you want, really."

"I don't want to see him again," she says firmly. "Ever. Can we make sure… I'll testify. But I don't want him to see me again. I want him to die never seeing me again. Or live. Whichever. But he doesn't get to see me again. Ever. That's his punishment from *me*."

"I think it can be arranged," Alana says. "Under the circumstances.'

“They’re going to think I helped.”

Her psychiatrist turns and looks at her sideways. Thoughtfully. Her eyes are shrewd and calculating.

“I think,” she says deliberately. “That you need to take Baxter for a walk, Will. Or maybe… That we should take him for a walk, Abigail.” She slides to her feet. “Up you get. You’ll be alright to get home, Will? I’ll take Baxter home with me, and bring him back in the next couple of days. Though… Hold up, I just have to…” She gestures. “First.”

“Sure,” Will says, and very quietly, as she retreats to the ensuite bathroom… “Can I come back and see you sometime, Abigail?”

She smiles at him. “Any time.” She touches the bracelet on her wrist lightly and meaningfully. “Have you really stopped eating meat? All meat?’

“Turns out that beyond the angst and brainflame, I’m a simple man. Meat’s a complicated and complicating issue for me now. On every level.”

“We should start a support group,” she agrees. “Two for tea?”

In the washroom, Alana’s phone rings. Will listens to her murmur. She emerges, flushed and annoyed.

“Everything okay?" Abigail ventures.

“No,” she says. “Freddie Goddamned Lounds again.”

“Huh? She’s got your number?”

“No. That was Jack. The iPod and batteries are clean. She even took a polygraph test, and that came out clean too. Lying through her teeth, we all know it, but...” She grr’d. “She’s completely refusing to cite her source. Says there isn’t anything to cite: she got an anonymous tip that something big was going down in St. Louis. Didn’t even say it was Ripper related, just the neighbourhood and time of the takedown. Holes big enough to drive a truck through, but she does have the right to remain silent. And she didn’t do anything but get out of her car and take pictures. The street was clear, so she didn’t know it was a takedown. They can’t get her for deliberately interfering with a federal investigation.”

“Fuck.”

“So say we all.”

“So she’s back on the streets?”

“Yeah.” She hurls herself down, then up again, clipping Baxter’s leash. “Come on, Abigail. I need some fresh air. Bye, Will."

He wiggles his fingers at her, and watches them go, rubbing his jaw. His own phone chimes. He pulls it out automatically.

BK: **Will be home tomorrow aft. Mind if I borrow your sofa?**

WG: **No problem. Stupid question; are you alright?**

BK **: Not terribly, no. I may even require cuddles.**

WG: **My sofa, and accompanying manly shoulder, are all yours. How are Jimmy and Brian?**

BK: **Vegetarian. The entire team's sworn off for life, fish included, and no, I'm not kidding. Z. will be lucky to come out of this without an eating disorder, and I'm not kidding there either. He was holding it together till we hit the vacuum-sealed bags labelled 'Grandma's steak and kidney pie'. He was raised by his grandmother, and she was English. Made it for him every Monday night for as far back as his memory goes, till she died two years ago.'**

WG: **Jesus Christ.**

Then -

WG: **Sorry. I know you're Jewish.**

BK: **Not so sure about that any more. Jews don't believe that people go to Hell. Quoth every Special Agent here right now: We Really, Really Really Want To Believe.**

WG: **I'm sorry.**

BK **: For G-d's sake, Graham, don't you, of all people, dare to apologize! Hannibal Lecter may be the official hero right now, but *you* were the one who ended this. Don't think we don't all realize that. Whatever hell you've been through because of who and what you are... *You* brought the Ripper down.**

WG: **How is Miriam Lass?**

BK: **Look at you, humbly changing the subject. She's in a secured facility with her detox team. They've got to wean her off everything she was on before they can even begin to touch her on the psychiatric level.**

WG: **Lecter again?**

BK: **No. Conflict of interest. He's excused himself from the case in entirety, and told Jack to pick someone he didn't know and had never interacted with to treat her. No one he does know could be remotely objective right now. I think, and again, NK, that Purnell made a call to Canada and is requesting a loaner courtesy of her contacts in the RCMP.**

WG: **He's excused himself entirely?**

BK: **Yes. It's SOP, or would be if anything like this had ever happened before in the history of ever, but they'd have had a really hard time refusing him, all things**

considered, if he did want in. He told Jack straight up he wasn't going to ask, though, that he's retiring from everything for awhile but the Hobbs case and a few select private patients so that he'll have the time and mental space to work on getting his own shit together. The only thing he asked was that when the time comes, he be the one to write the official book. Word's out already, I've heard. No publisher in America - traditional or online - is going to touch anyone coming in with a manuscript that doesn't have his byline. Alana said that she heard though the grapevine that that asshole Chilton actually threw a screaming temper tantrum - in public - when his own publisher told him that his proposal was a no-go.'

Will snorts in sour amusement.

WG: **Alright. Well, tell everyone I said hello, and that I'll be hosting the corn boil on my back-forty once everything's calmed a bit. If you run across Lounds, do make a point to tell her that she's not invited?**

BK: **Roger that. Will?**

WG: **Yeah?**

BK: **Thank you. The world's a better place because you're in it.**

WG: **Likewise, I'm sure. Let me know when you're getting in. I'll meet your plane. Tacky, maybe, but is there anything in particular you'd like for dinner?**

BK: **Yeah. You. Also, nothing that's ever been frozen, or that has a frozen ingredient in it, pls.**

WG: **You got it. Do you still eat fish, at least?**

BK: **Eventually. Maybe. Not just yet. I don't mind if you do, though. Alright, gotta run. We have to do the final run through, and Z. will need me to hold his hand while Jimmy holds his bucket. TTYL!**

Will is just about to tuck his phone back in his pocket when it chimes again. He smiles, and is readying his thumbs to respond to the P.S. when…

Hello, Will.

His thumbs still. His lips thin.

Hello, Dr. Lecter.

How very chilly of you, Mr. Graham. Are we reduced to formality again, then?

At the risk of sounding impolite… Fuck off and die.

There is a pause.

Have I offended you since the last time we talked, Will?

You are the offense.

Forgive me. I was under the impression that we had reached an understanding on that subject, the last time we talked?

Presupposing we're not talking on our last text exchange… What part of our final conversation before you rammed a knife in my gut and left me bleeding out with my fellow sacrificial lambs on the floor-slash- altar of your self-dedicated chapel: *i.e.* kitchen, would ever give you that impression?

There is a long, long pause. Will can't help but think that it's rather more melodramatic than Abigail's version.

Is that the last thing you remember, Will?

No. The last thing I remember is you offering me your forgiveness. For the record? I don't recall, despite your obvious assumptions there, reassuring you of mine. And for the record again? There's a reason for that. You didn't, and don't have it.

He squeezes his eyes shut, simultaneously exultant and terrified by his own words. After a full minute, the phone chimes again.

We need to talk.

Over dinner? I'll pass, thanks. Oh, and Lecter? If you lay so much as a finger, a *thought,* on Beverly Katz or anyone of our mutual acquaintance, and I do mean anyone, *ever* - I *will* be writing my own expose. Empath, remember, and I have more than enough insight on your methods and mind, and yes, history, to be able to convince the FBI that you are the world's biggest liar-liar-pants-on-fire liar that ever lived, anywhere and anywhen.

I do not intend to interfere with Miss Katz, Will, or as you say, anyone else of our mutual acquaintance. I am simply requesting a single meeting, in person, to discuss certain matters that may affect the way you obviously regard me right now.

Exactly how stupid do you think I am, again?

I do not think you stupid at all. I do know, however, that you are fully recovered, and therefore cannot hope to blame your abominable manners on your fevered brain.

You're right. They're directly attributable, as it turns out, to all the ills you've ever afforded me. Would you like the list, for official reference, or may I assume that you've got it all written up as extrapolated perspective in your relevant case observations and mind palace already?

One meeting, Will. I swear on Mischa's grave that I will not harm you.

Your interpretation of harm is not mine, Dr. Lecter. And… She has an identifiable grave, then?

You do not remember visiting it?

What?

Your last memory is not my last memory. Please, Will. I cannot leave things like this. If, after the one meeting, you choose to walk away, I will not try to stop you. I will leave you, and those you define as yours, alone, always.

Give me one reason, Lecter. One reason why I should oblige you. Why I should trust you.

He listens to his own heart beat, rapidly, threadily, in agitation.

There is no reason I can offer you. The reason, and trust, must come from you, as an act of active grace, if not forgiveness and love. Neither of those things are gifts that I may demand. I have not earned them from you, in any sense, or in any context that you remember.

Will sinks down on the bed slowly as he rereads that, twice. A great sense of exhaustion suddenly overcomes him.

How did we get to this point, Dr. Lecter?

I do not know. I am trying to embrace it as an act of active grace. If it cannot be so for me, I can only hope that after this one meeting, one way or the other, it will prove so for you.

It doesn't erase those things that happened. Those things you did. It's a re-set, not a do-over. Past, or future, is prologue, as they say.

I am well aware.

You're saying the right things, Will corrected as he typed **. The things you think I want to hear.**

I may be a grade A fancy control freak, Will, but even I cannot hope for the literal power to turn back time.

No, just my perception of reality as pertains to everything that's happened to this point. Been there, done that, bought, or was rather gifted, the unfortunate strapped and buckled t-shirt. No thanks.

Dolarhyde was not random. In the continuation of events that I remember and you do not, he attempted to kill your wife and stepson.

You don't say. Presupposing I were to take your statement at face value, how hard did you have to work to convince him that that was really his idea?

You truly are a clever boy, Will Graham, aren't you? But even you can only be so clever, given the context again, that I have, and you do not.

And again, I have only your word on that. Which, as long as we're being honest, I trust about as much as I do… Well… You. Am I going to need a new phone after this

No. I am, in all modesty, a bit better than that. I swapped my adapted version out with the one on your night table when I was kissing you, after downloading all the information on a blank after one of my hacking expeditions.

Really, Lecter? Really? Is that supposed to be funny?

Ah. I'm sorry. That one was actually inadvertent. I actually prefer 'riding the information highway in reverse,' but then again, my therapist tells me that I have a rather cripplingly overdeveloped sense of the evasive aesthetic on all levels, Translated: I need work when it comes to my directed, honest and straightforward communication skills.

In spite of himself, Will snorts at that, and recalling Alana's descriptives, and just for the hell of it, and perhaps, even, to just see what happens next...

What the hell do you see in her anyway? The woman wanders through life in a self-projected pastel haze. It's like, her superpower, and can't translate as anything remotely exciting in the sack.

Really, Will?

Unfortunately, yes, really. I can just picture it, and it's all quivering white throats and half closed eyes and tongues thrumming with pleasure as her back arches and beads of perspiration gather on her lip and slip down her exquisite, gently full and silky cleavage, never mind the sensuous pre-bubble baths and close ups on hands and dubious angles that could be the turn of a knee or an elbow as easily as her heaving bosom. Somewhere in there, your fingertips are ghosting erotically over her as your lips feather sensuously, and the painful sparks of ecstasy that she's never felt before are gathering, and her breath is hitching and catching, and after you're both done your way body surfing, naked and artistically entwined, through your softly blurred and slow-mo version of Paradise Lost, you go to clean up, and there she is, holding a gun on you while she sits on her bed and you emerge, drying yourself from the shower and she's gazing at you with sorrowful wide eyes but grim resolution, and you're saying 'may I at least get dressed first?' and when she finally gets away from you it's 'you thought you'd make a meal of me and you may yet, but not today, Hannibal, not today,' and you watch her go with a pang, but no real regret, as her hips gently sway and the door closes just as gently behind her, and the music swells and ebbs, and all cuts to the next scene.

There is a resounding silence from the phone.

Well? Am I wrong?

No, Lecter types. **That is quite bizarre. Bizarrely accurate. The sequence of events is a little skewed, but…**

Empath. We'll be here till Thursday. Try the faux-veal. Really? You get off on that sort of thing?

The aesthetics *are* quite nice. Intellectually arousing.

Yes well. I don't do intellectually arousing. Candles are for power outages, and flowers are for funerals. They don't even work that well there.

Mm. And it is at this point that I feel that I must remind you that I *am* a psychiatrist, Will, and present the straightforward observation that you are making it very difficult indeed not to analyze you.

Well, you obviously have at least one working thumb on your two incapacitated hands. Make of that what you will. Or can. And before you ask, no, I will not pick you up from the airport tomorrow. You're just going to hitch a ride with someone who actually wants to accommodate you, or, alternatively, slum it up with yourself in the backseat of an Uber.

Lovely. Tell me, Will. How was your visit with Abigail?

Will stares at the phone, momentarily and completely paralyzed. Somehow, his thumbs seem to manage anyway.

You'll have to ask Dr. Bloom on her if you want any information there, Dr. Lecter.

If I wanted information from Dr. Bloom, I would ask her, Mr. Graham. As I exchanged your phone with one of my adaptations, I regret to inform you that your GPS is showing.

Son of a...

Have a nice life, Dr. Lecter.

Mm. I imagine that she is not that thrilled with me either. Might I venture to state that a single meeting with me might allay my professional impulse to request a visit with the daughter in the interests of furthering my treatment of her father?

And Will begins to type again, but his fingers still as something else occurs to him. He backspaces rapidly.

Dr. Lecter.

Yes, Will?

If I were to accept your purported statement that, given the apparent and unexpected temporal misalignment as per our return dates, there is more to remember between us

than I actually do remember - how is it that you are assuming that Abigail would be less than thrilled with you? The fact that you butchered her notwithstanding?

You are attempting to prevent me from contacting her. If she did not remember what has gone before, if she too were not a return - you would not be so concerned on my staying away. We have, after all, never met in this timeline, and things have changed. As you are now aware yourself of my proclivities and tendencies to machinate events, I could not hope to be nearly as successful, as you see it, at manipulating her. Why then, does it matter whether I see her or not?

It matters if you think it matters. And I have a very hard time imagining that it doesn't. You don't like it when people don't fall in line or at your feet, and you're avoiding the question besides. As you obviously have assumed to this point that you don't need my forgiveness, that means that somewhere in your past, if not mine, I did forgive you. Which means I lived to forgive you. Did she? Because she would have, if she had lived, wouldn't she, if you'd only had the chance to convince her that Father Knows Best. And that means… You didn't get the chance.

The curtains blow softly behind him.

I would greatly prefer to discuss this in person, Will.

I'm sure you would. Don't call me, Dr. Lecter. I'll call you. And if you have any sense of self-preservation at all, you'll stay away from my girl. All of my girls, and my boys, and my little dogs too. I'm not the Will Graham you remember, you see? You showed me yourself, and as a result, Hannibal Lecter, *I see you.* I *see* you. And in allowing me to see you, you've put that knife to your own throat. Because I remember too. Maybe not everything… But enough. Enough to know that no matter that we're standing opposite each other now and not beside each other as you would have it, and me - you can see in my eyes now that your experiments succeeded after all. You're not alone anymore. And as I'm not your patient, or friend, or ally, or lover… As you can't force me to delight in it, and you… The most you can hope for is that I tolerate you. Which I will… As long as you maintain tolerable behaviour, and remember what I consider tolerable, and don't. If you don't, you *will* find out what happens next. You *will* find out, and you'll discover the truth of the one thing about me that you never really processed - that my empathy isn't just a tool for others to wield, or a weapon to be used against me. It's a weapon, full stop. One that you don't have, and can never hope to have, and so again, can't understand. Which puts you rather at the disadvantage, wouldn't you say? You can tolerate a weapon that you understand, even though you disdain to use it. If you want to understand my weapon… You're going to have to learn how it works for yourself. It's the only way. Would that be an experiment worth your effort, Dr. Lecter? The human experiment, where the devil puts himself in the experiment and becomes human himself, in order to learn just what it is that makes humans, when it comes down to it, what he always feared God was saying after all in creating them, in daring to love them… M*ore* than his equal?

Will doesn't wait for an answer, just powers off the phone, his eyes burning. They're not burning with tears though, or fear or frustration. No. He may have just released hell, Will

Graham thinks. Then again… No matter that time and the devil always do come round to roost…

The angels do seem to come with them. Perhaps though since he doesn't appear to have died after all, it runs a bit deeper than that, *after* all.

Perhaps it's just as simple as, not the case or even the fact, but the truth again, that angels, when it comes right down to it, don't actually rely on the whims of demons to instruct their movements, temporally or otherwise. They don't come round, temporally or otherwise, because they never *leave.*

Round and round and round we go, Will Graham thinks. *The end is the beginning. Time is a circle, as the circular head of the pin, and it's all come round again, and what does it matter, really, how it happened? I'm here.* He's *here. Round and round and round we go, where it stops, only God knows. Round and round and round and round, and with no beginning and no end, it's only the dance that counts. Angels and demons dancing on the head of the pin, and the demons led last time, and as it all comes round, this time…*

This time it's the angels' turn.

The young empath stands up, straightening the bedspread neatly, and makes his way to the front desk.

"May I…" He gestures. The receptionist pushes it over obligingly. Will picks up the receiver, leaning hip first against the counter, and presses buttons rapidly. The phone on the other end rings.

"Hey Alana," he greets the inquiring voice. "No, everything's fine. Well no, not everything. I just dropped my phone in the toilet. Do me a favour, would you, and text Bev? Tell her I should be back up in a couple hours; I'm heading out now to pick up a new one. Yeah, yeah. You sure you're alright with Baxter? Uh huh. No more than one hashbrown before bed, now, or you *will* regret it. He won't, but you will. You too."

He hangs up the phone, and redials, pressing the appropriate sequence rapidly.

"Will Graham's answering droid," he says as the answering service prompts him to record his message. "Friday the sixth, eighteen-twenty-two o' clock, and he's not ignoring you or avoiding your call, he dropped his phone in the drink, and is, even as we speak, off to see the I-Wizard and obtain himself a new virtual brain to complement his officially recovered biological equivalent. Leave your name and number and he'll get back to you as soon as he's enabled. Or, you know, when he gets around to it. FYI to the FBI, that'll be sooner rather than later if you offer up a nice 'Please, Will', with it, and no, Jack, you are not exempt just because you're you. Later!"

"Thank you," he says, flashing a dazzling smile at the receptionist as he replaces the receiver. "I really appreciate it."

"No problem," the receptionist says, and then a bit coyly... "I don't suppose you'll be handing out that new phone number at any point?"

“Mm.” Will examines him out of automatic habit - politely at first, or rather to be polite, but once he’s done the mandated once-over…

Huh.

Bit young, but...

His head, now that it is back in the game, is definitely not the only bit of him that’s feeling alert and focused. “That depends entirely on how well you were listening just now, doesn’t it?”

The receptionist grins.

“Please, Will?” he offers.

“Very good.” He reaches for the post-it stack beside the anchored pen and scribbles. “No to the phone, yes to the e-mail address.” He tears off the post-it and reaches out, sticking it neatly on the young man’s own phone, resting on the desk before him. “And what do we say if anyone, and I do mean *anyone* - even if they come in and tell you they’re God and they’re on an emergency - comes in and asks for it?”

“What does God need with a starship?” the receptionist offers.

“Good boy.” Will winks at him and saunters out, whistling softly. The receptionist watches him go, and as soon as he is out of sight, clutches his hands to his heart and mock-swoons.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Next Day

In a way, Francis Dolarhyde (as Lecter has presented him to the world, anyway) has his lasting empathic impact on Will after all, leaving him as the unanticipated beneficiary of his projected personal legacy. The old has given way to the new, and when the last of the psychic crimson tide ebbs from the metaphorical floor of Hannibal Lecter's all-too-actual kitchen, it is Will Graham who rises: unscarred, unchained, and definitively a new man. Clear-minded, aware, returned via the shave and haircut to his natural pristine and innocent younger state, and ensconced in the ordered, scrubbed and uncomplicated personal environment… Will muses on the screamingly psychological obvious *there* as he sits in the airport coffee shop, sipping from a styrofoam cup of rudely and crudely bagged tea and fending off frankly lustful glances from every angle.

The unrelenting attention, oddly enough, doesn't bother him in the least. His pointedly established position on the neuro-atypical spectrum had, after all, been largely *self*-established in order to provide an acceptable social excuse for his empathically induced hermetic tendencies. Now though, it seems that his habituated psyche is taking advantage of the excuse provided by his public illness to step off its established path for good and all.

Though the metaphor there isn't quite accurate either. Will feels as if he hasn't so much stepped off the path but out from under the weight of his own shadow. In the clear light of day, the new version sits, sipping his truly abominable tea, thoroughly illuminated (to say nothing of considerably better dressed), and quite willing to see what happens next.

It probably isn't quite what Hannibal had had in mind when he began his experiments in self-revelation, but then again… It just went to show you, Will thinks, of the power of ineffability at its best.... And, that no matter how small or indifferent or irrelevant you might think God, it didn't mean that He was bound to share your opinions.

The announcement of the incoming booms sedately through the airport. Will stands, tosses his cup in the trash, straightens the lay of the sea-foam green cashmere sweater that he's wearing as a complement to his brand new black (faux) leather bomber jacket, skin-tight black Levis and sleek black short boots, and sets off toward Gate Two.

Ten minutes later, he is holding an exhausted, bedraggled and inconsolably weepy Beverly Katz in his arms, soothing her and murmuring to her and kissing away her tears as he thinks on how compulsions, psychologically speaking, while following the same original template, tend not to disappear, but to evolve... Instead of having to quash (or not) the urge to take in every four-footed waif and stray that crosses his path, he seems now drawn to adopt the two-legged variety.

“Get over here,” he orders Jimmy and Brian, hovering awkwardly and both looking absolutely physically and emotionally *spectral.* They hesitate; he shakes his head. “Now. Both of you.”

His voice is strong and firm and solid. They… Are not. Somehow, despite the relatively short length of his arms, he is holding all three of them at once (though he saves the kisses for Beverly) as the besieged, wavering dams of their mangled, shredded eyes burst and they erupt all over him. It is noisy and messy and heartbreaking, and it doesn’t bother him at all: no, not one bit. He just closes his eyes, breathing as the pendulum swings… But the centre, his centre, still holds, and it is there, at last, under their empathic tsunami of shared grief and rage, that Will Graham doesn’t lose, but finds his true self: not as the pendulum after all, but as the anchoring bolt that secures it.

“Jesus,” Brian says soddenly as he finally withdraws. Will hands him one of three packs of tissues from his pockets, offering up the other two he’d brought to his companions. “Aren’t we pathetic. I’m so sorry, Will. We just… It’s…” He bursts into tears again. Will just releases Jimmy and Bev and hauls him in for a hug all his own.

“No apologies,” he says, as Bev had said to him in her texts. “Not for this. Never, ever, ever for this. Come on, the car’s waiting.”

“We were just going to catch an Uber back to the city,’ Jimmy says. “It’s no problem, really; it’s on the company dime, and…"

“No,” Will says. Even Brian, through the renewed storm, still manages to look a bit startled at the hard authoritarian tone there.

“No…. What?”

“No Uber. No city. You’re all coming home with me.”

“Um. What?”

“I have the spare room. Well, two of them, since I sleep downstairs, but one’s got no bed and my boat engine collection all over it, so if you guys don’t mind bunking together, Bev and I can just take the sofa bed.” He shakes his head as they open their mouths to protest. “I said no. You went through this together; you can take a few days off to process together. I’ve had the cleaners in, the kitchen’s stocked... The city’ll just set you on edge, especially with the press all wanting your personal perspectives.”

“You have a life, Will,” Jimmy says. “We can’t just ask you to put it on hold for us.”

“You’re not asking. And I’m not offering. You don’t need a sitter, just a place to stay, and someone to run interference for you with Jack until the shock wears off. I can do that easily enough, and if he whines, I’ll just tell him to back off or I’ll be holding his next big case hostage to his cooperation.”

“You’d actually do that?”

“Yes,” Will says uncompromisingly again. Wendy-Wannabe and her pack of Lost Boys aren’t scheduled to get into any trouble that he can actually prevent for another week or two, and with a bit of judicious finagling and a few anonymous tips, he’ll be able head them off before they ever fly in from Neverland.

“Come on,” Bev says to them. “It’s alright. He wouldn’t offer if it weren’t.”

They follow as an obedient little straggle of ducklings, and Will tucks them into the car, sliding in. Brian huddles, and Jimmy reaches out and pulls him in roughly against his side. It’s an eminently paternal gesture - he’s got almost twenty years on the younger man after all - and Will has to close his eyes a moment before starting the ignition. He can’t even imagine what’s provoked that kind of open intimacy between the Academy’s two top class clowns... No. He can. He can’t help but wonder how Lecter pulled off arranging the necessary details of the crime scene all in two weeks, never mind without Dolarhyde noticing, but he obviously did an absolutely *spectacular* job.

“You’re not allergic to dogs, are you?” he asks belatedly as he pulls out.

“No,” Jimmy says. Will glances in the mirror. Brian is already three-quarters asleep. “You’re a good guy, Graham. Thank you. He’s pretty… I honestly don’t know if he’ll be able to go back after this.”

“Sounds like I should be thanking all of you for telling Jack you’d boycott the scene if he called me in.” He can’t help himself. “Can I ask how many?"

There is a long pause.

“It’ll come out anyway, Jimmy. Over two hundred,” Bev says. “Over the last four years. There was a filing cabinet. With names, dates, and histories, including a few from when he was abroad when he was younger. And recipes attached. To each. And pictures. Guy worked on the wrong side of the developers’ counter. He could have made a fortune working as a food porn photographer.”

Will digests that *(two hundredoverfouryearsthat’soneaweekforSundaydinner)* and deliberately pulls over to the side of the road. They all sit quietly as he gathers his composure, forehead on the steering wheel. His cheeks, when he sits up, are dead white with high flecks of colour, his mouth a thin hard line. He reaches for his phone on the dashboard.

“Jack,” he says. “Will. Bev says there was a filing cabinet?”

A puzzled voice sounds.

“The Ripper appreciated art. Art is meant to be displayed, and the cabinet… It’s just another exhibit. Well, not just another exhibit, the culmination of the rest, meant to be found and displayed if and when he was discovered, and as that’s the case, the contents aren’t necessarily what they appear. The Ripper never presented as an original, remember? His public sculptures were always based off of other artists’ work. So… Line up the histories of the purported victims, compare them with the DNA samples of what you actually found onsite, and if you don’t have anything that matches certain of the cases - and I’m guessing

that as we're going back four years, that that's at least three quarters of them, if not more; freezer burn's a thing, and as a gourmet, he liked his food fresh - the credit's likely just there to boost his own credit. Intended, quite probably, to mess with our heads; as a way of keeping himself indefinitely *in* our heads, through cases which, through lack of real physical evidence again, could never be definitively closed in any sense. Like Miriam's, again.''

And Jimmy's head jerks up. Bev physically turns in her seat, staring at him, her eyes ablaze with sudden desperate hope.

"Yes," Will says into the phone. "Yes, I'm sure. The Ripper might always have been destined to give way to the newborn in Dolarhyde's eyes, but he was still an entity in and of himself, and as he *was* destined to die, he wanted immortality. All serial killers who make the point of going public do. They want to be remembered. How better to be remembered than by never permitting the public psychological resolution via actual bodies, and he did have to present as a normal guy besides. That and the fact that he was in the military would have limited his physical time to hunt, especially if he wasn't always running the same state preserve. Still, the more victims he presented, the more bereaved families would be visiting his grave. To shit and piss on it, maybe, but to an attention junkie… Negative attention is better than none, right?"

The oath on the other end of the line is concise and pithy.

"Yeah, yeah. Jimmy and Z and Bev are all out at my place for the rest of the week. Off-call. You've got enough to keep you busy without them now, and they need a break. No. No emergencies or you'll be out a consult on your next emergency. I'll still be in for my classes, but… Yeah. Later, then."

"You okay?' Bev asks as he stuffs his phone away.

"Yeah. Well, no, but I will be. I made gumbo and cornbread."

"What?:

"Gumbo. The vegetarian version *a la* Emeril Lagasse. I'm no gourmet, but if it's sourced from the bayou, I'm in there. All that practice cooking rice and beans growing up; it was all we could afford, so I'd swipe the necessary spices from the bulk mart and follow along his show on the TV."

"Oh." She sits back. "That sounds… Really good, actually. I can cover the breakfast shift. I make really bitchin' pancakes."

"Tomorrow. We'll worry about that tomorrow. Tonight… I take care of all of you."

"Not to belabor the point, but aren't you supposed to be all shy and socially awkward and uncomfortable with others invading your personal space?'" Jimmy inquires from the back seat.

"Turns out the main thing I was uncomfortable with was the encephalitis invading my personal brain," Will explains. "My neurologist says that it's probably been simmering since

I was in my early teens. It can cause all kinds of issues, including the tendency to take the chronic path of least socially stimulating resistance out of self-preservation."

"That… Must be very weird. Finding yourself under it all, and all. The real you has much better taste in clothes."

"It's very liberating, actually. Since no one's ever actually met the real me, as you put it, they can't tell me I'm getting myself wrong. I can be whoever the hell I want to be now, and who would ever know if I'm lying?"

"There's something very disturbing there." Jimmy leans his head back. "But I'm way too tired to figure it out now. Sweet or savoury?"

"Uh?"

"Cornbread. Sweet or savoury."

"Oh. I made a pan of each. Some of the dogs like the one, the others like the other, and none of them are fond of vegetables, so I'm accommodating for the changes in their diet right now by pandering in terms of comfort food."

Jimmy doesn't answer. Bev eyes Will, then unfastens her seatbelt, turns, and arranges herself so her head is on his knee between his belly and the steering wheel, face pressed to his sweater. Will looks down, startled.

'What…"

"You smell good," she says, eyes closed. "Shush. I'm remembering what good smells like."

He strokes her hair for a moment, one-handed, then on an impulse, winds a handful around his fist and tugs lightly and experimentally. Eyes closed, her wide grin flashes, cut off mid-yawn. As if on cue, his phone beeps. He retrieves it off the dash again and glances down, one eye on the road, as he thumbs his e-mail. There is a flashing message. The receptionist at Abigail's facility's name, it would appear, is Stef. Will memorizes the number swiftly, and flicks off his phone, reaching his pocket for another, this one pay-as-you go.

"Hello, Stef," he says pleasantly.

The suppressed squee almost makes him laugh out loud.

"Hello, Will," Stef's voice says breathily. "I was hoping you would call!"

"Of course you were. I've got a pretty packed schedule for the next few days; what's yours like after… Mm. Tuesday?'

There is a pause.

"I'm free on Thursday night." It is very hopeful. "If you are?"

"Sounds good. Send me an address where I can pick you up, and we'll grab a cup of coffee."

“Yes *sir!”* Will can almost feel his eyes stretch, doe-like and dilated, over the phone.

“Will is fine.” He deliberately injects an indulgent note in there. “I trust I don’t need to educate you on protocols such as safe-calls?:

“Of course not!” it is a bit indignant. The internal laugh turns to a guffaw. “I’m a *big* boy! Mm. A very *very* big boy. You’ll see.”

“Mm. Do you have a last name, big boy?”

“Um.” Stef says. There is a pause. “Believe it or not…” It’s a bit sheepish. “It’s Kirk.”

“Really? As in ‘What-would-God-Need-With-A-Starship’ Kirk?”

“Yes.”

He snorts with laughter. “Alright. Send me the e-mail. I’ll see you on Thursday. Take care now.”

“Yes, Will. You too!”

He flicks the phone. In his lap. Bev sniggers.

“You don’t mind, do you?” he asks the top of her head. “You said you’re aro, but if you want monogamy for the duration, for health and safety reasons or whatever, I’m good with that too. I’ll just send him an e-mail.”

“No, no. Health and safety’s a priority, but it always is anyway, all around. All’s good. You want to borrow my motorcycle?”

“What?”

“My motorcycle. The hair, the eyes, the leather jacket, the boots… Add a bike, and you’re *in* there. So to speak.’

“Not an issue. Trust me. And no, thank you. Licence aside, which it isn’t, I’m not into public displays of indecency, and a car allows the legal essentials of walls and a roof. You can be my own safe-call though, if you like.”

“Sounds good.” She snuggles down, pressing a kiss somewhere north-east of his upper left thigh. His hand removes back to her hair and tugs reprovingly. She gleams up at him through her one visible eye.

“Now now,” he says. “Not while I’m driving.”

“The real you is a bit of a skank, isn’t he?" Brian’s voice says sleepily. “Under it all?”

“Go back to sleep, Brian,” Will advises. “This is all a dream, to which you are not invited.”

“He’s very bossy,” Jimmy observes to Bev. “Isn’t he. How do you suppose that would work?”

“With…’

“Lecter.’

“He’s got no working hands right now,” Will says. “So… It won’t, not till he recovers. Or hires out in the interim, and I… I, Mr. Price, am not for sale. My associates, such as they are, have to earn my regard the old-fashioned way.”

“Do they?” Bev inquires. “How did I manage that?’

“Sometimes I do go on instinct,” he concedes. “And I’d been eyeing up your ass for quite some time by the time you wound your way past my token defenses and the associated IV tubes.’

“We really appreciate this, Will,” Brian says. “I know we don’t know each other very well, and you like your privacy, a lot, but… Going home right now…”

“It’s no problem,” Will reassures him. “You like pecan tarts?”’

“Uh?”

“I didn’t make them but they’re sourced from a local vegan bakery I found online. They sell these little cartons of french vanilla cashew cream to go with them, and I may or may not have picked up a bottle of bourbon to round everything off.”

“Jesus. That sounds… Yeah.” He sounds on the verge of tears again. “I’m sorry. Christ, I just... “ He dissolves once more. Jimmy gathers him up.

“We might just go straight for the bourbon,” he says to Will. “And whatever else you’ve got in stock there. We haven’t had the chance yet.”

“Pecan pie’s as good for breakfast as it is for dinner,” their host concedes. “And gumbo’s better every day.”

“We’ll sleep on the sofa bed,” Brian says soggily. “So you and Bevvy there have privacy. And a door. She likes being nailed up against the door.”

“Yes, I know. She gave me her list straight up so we wouldn’t have to waste time. Now hush, all of you.” He reaches over and presses buttons. Grieg’s ‘Morning’ eases out: soft and smooth and sweet. “Daddy needs to concentrate on the road now.”

“You know you look all of fourteen without the beard, right? It doesn’t really work on the psychological level.”

“Maybe not where y’all come from,” he drawls in his best Louisiana twang. “We start early, down the bayou.”

All three snort with laughter.

Two Days Later

Will emerges slowly and comfortably from sleep, coaxed out from under his massive pile of pillows, blankets and dogs by the scent of perking coffee and an ear-wincing symphony of raucous whoops, cheers and maniacal cackling emanating from the kitchen. He rolls over, shoving Tinkerbell off of his face, and props himself on his elbow, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes… After a moment, he stumbles to his feet, tugging on his sweatpants, and makes his way to the powder room. Mission accomplished, he heads for the coffee, and is greeted as he enters the kitchen by the sight of Bev and Brian huddled over Brian's tablet, leaning on each other and wheezing helplessly. Jimmy is actually lying on the floor, arms outflung and snortling with exhausted laughter. Will, yet only half processing, decides perhaps that it is best not to ask, and just steps over him in order to reach his target... Duly fortified, he leans against the counter, sipping, and regards his sprawled houseguest.

"You alright there?" he inquires. Jimmy pulls himself up, leaning against the counter.

"Yes," he says. "Oh my God, yes. Show him, Z. I cannot even."

Brian taps obligingly. Will comes and leans over his shoulder. Bev slips down to refill her own mug, coming back to perch just as the YouTube clip starts up again.

"No, no," she urges. "Don't ask. Just watch. And… Here we go.'

"What…'

"Shhh! Turn it up!" Jimmy crowds in. Will bats him off semi-irritably, just as…

"Live from Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis Missouri, we're witnessing the release of renowned surgeon and psychiatrist, Dr. Hannibal Lecter of Baltimore, Maryland. Dr. Lecter was admitted three days ago after his heroic takedown of the notorious serial killer, Francis Dolarhyde, the Chesapeake Ripper, resulted in serious bodily injury….

"Oh for… Seriously, people? You're forcing this crap on me before I've even finished my first cup?"

"Wait for it," Bev urges. "Wait for it…"

The doors of the hospital swing open and a tall, familiar figure emerges, immaculately clad of course, and in the company of half a dozen imposing guards. Jack Crawford is there too, one hand firmly and supportively on Lecter's back. The crowds of journalists surge forward, but before the first can emit a syllable, a small, delicate figure steps out, dodging to the front ranks. Her hair is blood red and wild, and her bright, feral eyes glimmer in the flashing lights of the cameras.

"Dr. Hannibal Lecter," Freddie Lounds purrs. "A truly inspiring demonstration of classic poetic justice. As a fellow Baltimorean, would you be willing to offer me first quote on the question now bound to be on the very tip of every American's tongue … How do you, the esteemed doctor who somehow managed to miss every single one of infamous patient's cues in your mutual sessions, find the sweet, sweet taste of admittedly belated victory? And did

you, during your time as his psychiatrist, manage to extract anything of import that I could share with my readers - perhaps on the subject on the Ripper's state of mind when he realized his beloved, if inept, physician's betrayal of his primary oath: 'Do No Harm?"

"Oh my *God*," Will says, aghast in spite of himself. "Really? *Really?'"*

"Shh!"

"You should be careful what you wish for, Miss Lounds," the figure is saying. "Or you will have a true first - a quote of me forgetting that I am a gentleman."

"Try me." Freddie Lounds' eyes gleam. Lecter's expression as he looks her over is one of utter, overt and completely unmistakable contempt and disdain.

"The man was a cannibal, Miss Lounds," he says, clearly and precisely. "And as he was a cannibal, I sincerely believe that, no matter his personal indignation, Francis Dolarhyde would bear me no ill will whatsoever as pertains to the specifics of my final exercise in self-defence. That being said… I'm quite certain that a woman such as yourself would be able, given enough time, to decipher the associative subtext there, but as I *am* a gentleman, in spite of myself, allow me to save you the effort. When it comes right down to it, and when all is said and done… It doesn't actually count unless you swallow."

And he turns and walks away, flanked by security, to his car.

"It's making the rounds of every channel out there. Not one station is censoring it, anywhere," Bev informs him as Will stares dumbly, and Brian and Jimmy start up again with the giggles. "Fucking *beautiful."*

"Yeah, alright," is all Will can manage. "That's just…" He gulps the last of his coffee. "I think I'm going to go take my shower now." He sets the mug down on the counter with rather more force than is strictly necessary, and promptly and hastily fumbles to catch it as it skids toward the edge. He just misses. It crashes and shatters. "Argh. Crap.'

"Oop." Brian grabs his shoulder as he lifts a foot. "No, don't move. Bevvy, grab the broom there. Bare feet, he'll cut himself and bleed all over the place. Dust-pan's on top of the recycling bin, Jimmy; just… That's it. Hold up. We've got you, man."

Seconds later, the floor is clear. Brian releases him.

"There you go," he says as Jimmy taps the pan against the bin and wipes it off with a damp paper towel that Bev hands him. "No harm done. Go on up and we'll get breakfast started."

"Thanks," Will says, and makes his way to the stairs, the coffee mug spinning in slow motion behind his eyes, crashing and splintering.

Coffee mug, not tea cup.

We've got you, man.

No harm done.

He stops on the landing and checks the bottom of his feet. They are clean and pristine. He runs a hand over his flat, untouched belly.

No harm done.

He grabs a towel from the immaculate linen closet and steps into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Moments later, the hot water is streaming around him, steam hissing and rising as a harmonic counterpart to the drumming rain pounding against the night-washed kitchen windows of his memory.

Round and round and round and

This time it's the angels' turn.

His own voice echoes in his ears. He opens his eyes, realizing he'd spoken the last aloud. He says it again, firmly.

"This time it's the angels' turn."

He washes quickly and rinses, stepping out, drying and tugging the sweatpants back on, wiping the stall down swiftly with his towel and hanging it neatly before padding out.

"Mm," Brian's voice floats appreciatively from the kitchen as he descends the stairs. "Captain *Crunch?* Man's got *game!*

"Captain Crunch, pfft," Jimmy scoffs. "Grab me the loaf of Italian bread there. Cinnamon toast is where it's *at*, yo!"

"Where it's *at*, yo?" Bev repeats. "What are you, old?"

"Chronologically established," Jimmy corrects loftily. "Baking sheet. Butter. Sugar. Fry up some eggs, throw in the chocolate Quik, and we've got my childhood breakfast of champions! WILL! SCRAMBLED OR FRIED?"

"Hard-boiled," Will says, appearing in the door, tugging on a t-shirt. "Just chuck a few in a pot of cold water and turn on the burner there."

"La!" Bev comes to kiss him enthusiastically. "Aren't we posh!"

"We have our moments." He kisses her back, squeezing her ass with both hands. She runs her hand over his stubbled cheek and tchs reprovingly.

"I know. I promised: six months minimum, but I think my electric razor must have fallen out when I was packing my stuff at the hospital. It's not in my things, and I checked the car, so I'll swing by and see if anyone found it and turned it in when I drive you all home day after tomorrow, I swear."

"Right in time for your date with Ensign *Kirrrrk?* " she teases.

“More right in time for my class Friday morning. Okay. I’m going to take the dogs ou..” The phone on the bedside table rings. Will sighs, releases the infinitely more enticing double handful, and goes to examine it, pressing ‘accept call’.

“They’re on vacation till the weekend, Jack,” he says before the man on the other end can answer. “So… No. You may not speak with any of them.”

“I called to talk to you, actually. Hello, Will! How are you this bright and lovely morning?”

“Quite well, thank you. What do you want?”

“Glad to hear it. I just wanted to pass on some yet as unpublicised news. Yours to determine on whether it’s good or bad, but you’ll be hearing about it soon enough, so..."

“Go on.” Will sits on the arm of the sofa. “I’ve had my first cup, my shower, and Jimmy’s making cinnamon toast. I’m ready.”

“Garrett Jacob Hobbs is dead,” Jack says bluntly. “One of the new orderlies got a little punchy when he was being transferred over from hospital to the medical facilities over the BSHCI, and Hobbs asked him if he had any sisters. Well, shooty. He grabbed one of the guards’ guns and got him right in the groin. He bled out before the medics could get there.”

Will blinks.

“Ah,” he says after a moment. “Are we upset?”

“No. We’ve saved a buttload of the taxpayers' money on room and board and medical care for the next fifty years, never mind the trouble of the inevitably pointless trial, and Frederic Chilton’s in mourning besides. He had Hobbs’ boudoir all prepped down the asylum, never mind his recording equipment and book contract, and now he’s shit out of luck. Again.”

“And the orderly?”

There is a small pause, then...

“He didn’t calm down when Hobbs went down. They had to take him out. The exchange patient got dinged; he’s in a coma. Doesn’t look like he’ll be coming out either; half his brain is gone with it, but he was a definite lifer and out of the news besides - he was arrested and convicted two years ago - so...: Yeah. at the risk of sounding like an asshole, and as both the law and justice had already been served... No great loss.”

“Ah.” Will sat up, puzzled. “Wait. Why were they sending Hobbs to Baltimore? He should have been kept in Minnesota; he never killed outside state lines.”

“Convenience. Hannibal planned to stay on his case, so we arranged an exchange of favours - and patients - and had him shipped over so that he wouldn’t have to fly back and forth. Never mind that, ironically, we thought he’d been safer there. Local public opinion on his subject, as you may imagine, is not all that.”

“So why are you calling me?’

“Just keeping you in the loop. Oop. Hold on.” He fades out, then in again. “Hannibal says to give him a couple of days before calling him for your appointment.”

“Not a problem.” Will’s eyes fall on his work table, and on the bright orange fishing lure-in-progress, and as it does, the pendulum swings, sharply. Once. He swears deeply, if internally. “Jack?’

“Mm?"

“What were the names of the orderly and the patient?”

“Ah. The orderly was Matthew Brown. The patient was Abel Gideon.’

Will rubs his temples.

“Abel Gideon,” he says. “He’s the one who took out his wife and her family, yeah?”

“Yup. Listen, I gotta go. We’re just firing up the plane. I’ll catch you when we get in, alright?’

“Sure.”

The phone clicks. He presses the button, and stares at the lure across the room.

Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Matthew Brown. Abel Gideon. Dolarhyde too, if you’re telling me the truth on past-and-future events. Nothing like tying up your loose ends, mm, Hannibal? Or did you think you were doing me a favour by promising to leave everyone I care for alone, while returning those you can, unharmed, and eliminating everyone who caused me pain and difficulty in the past in advance?

“Will?" Bev pokes her head out. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” He refocuses with a bit of effort. “Yeah, I’m fine. Garrett Jacob Hobbs is dead.”

“Um. What?"

“Yeah.” Brian appears, spatula in hand. “What?”

Will recites the facts Jack had outlined to him mechanically. Bev grimaces and comes to sit beside him.

“He’s not wrong, you know, babe," she says gently. “Hobbs was an open-and-shut case, and well. I remember Gideon’s case, all *too* well.”

“Do you?"

"Yes. We three were at the crime scene there. Honestly… The world’s better off without him. Without all three of them: Dolarhyde, Hobbs and Gideon. I do feel bad about the orderly, but… If he did keep going after being provoked like that, after taking out the offender... He

probably had his own issues that would have eventually left him on the wrong side of the bars."

"Maybe." He pushes himself up. His phone meeps at him again. He picks it up.

"Hey Alana. Jack just called. How's Abigail?"

"I'm just on my way in to tell her now. Is there any way you can come in to see her today? I know she'd appreciate it. So would I."

"Yeah, of course. Tell her I'll be there after dinner, okay?"

"Will do. Take care, Will."

"You too."

He sets the phone down. Bev takes his arm and steers him firmly out to the porch.

"Sit," she orders. "We'll bring everything out here. It won't be but a couple of minutes yet.'

He sits, watching the dogs as they run in frenzied barking circles, drunk on the crisp, fragrant autumn air and the scent of the trees and the rushing river in the distance.

He'll leave Freddie Lounds alone. And Chilton too. They're more entertaining to him humiliated than dead, and more to the point… He thinks they are to me too. Mason Verger… He liked Margot in his own fashion, for whatever that's worth, and he'll want to offer his weird equivalent of an apology over the baby again. Because he thinks that's what I'd want. So … He'll take out Mason too, if I don't get to him first, anyway, on my own time.. Randall Tier… He won't touch Tier, if only out of sentimental value. He was my -our - first, after all.

Tobias Budge… Franklyn Froideveaux…

Will reaches in his hip pocket and pulls out his anonymous pay-per, tapping it against his lips. Freddie Lounds might be a*bona fide* pain in the ass, and yes, she's rude enough, but the only *truly* unforgivable thing she's ever done in Hannibal Lecter's eyes was to work with Will towards bringing him down. In her own way, as arrogant, tactless, obnoxious and self-serving as she is… She's always been on the side of the angels.

She could yet be useful, he decides - if only because it will amuse him to see Hannibal's lips compress when he realizes she's now on Will's List of Untouchables. They do have something to bond over now, after all, now that they're both off the MeatMobile.

Will glances over his shoulder and taps quickly from memory, clearing his throat and tapping in the relevant extension number on request.

"Lounds. Leave a message!" the familiar voice chirps.

"Heads up: Chordophone String Shop," he says, dropping his voice to a deep, weirdly accented low growl. "It's all there in the name. Don't go in alone, at any point, or downstairs on invitation. You won't come out again. And remember… Everyone, *everyone* will

recognize you now, including those you're trying to outfox. You won't get any sympathy if you fuck it up, on any level, at any point."

He disconnects for the last time, and sits back. The screen door bangs open, and as if on cue, the dogs wheel about in absolute unison and tear up the steps, plopping themselves in a bright-eyed row before him with laughing eyes and lolling, hopefully drooling tongues.

"Pathetic," Brian says, and as Morris yips pleadingly… "Does that translate as 'Please, Will?"

"As a matter of fact, it does." Will reaches out and retrieves a pair of hard-boiled eggs, peeling them and breaking them into chunks. "Who's Will's good boy?"

They bark in rhapsodic chorus. He grins, and passes around the goods.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: The Reunion...

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